WDL

Zane Grey's WESTERN

No. 37

YELLOW HAIR!

Complete Novel by
CLAY FISHER

2/-

ALIAS ROSS RINGLER • GEORGE C. APPELL
BIRTH OF A TEXAN • THOMAS THOMPSON
BLUEPRINT • MARVIN DE VRIES
WELCOME TO THE BRIDE • ED LAVANWAY

"Yes, white man—we *will* meet again!"
Yellow Hair!, Chap. 5

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No. 37

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THIS MONTH'S COMPLETE NOVEL

Young Josh Kelso had led a hard, free life as a trapper and Indian scout for the Army's border outposts and, until now, had found little fault with it. So when Yellow Hair, the name the Indians had given to George A. Custer, sent for him, he cinched up his best horse and rode down to hear what the "Boy General" had to say.

Josh knew that as sure as sin was for sale in St. Louis, the over-ambitious Custer was aiming to drive the Cheyennes off the Canadian once and for all, and make a name for himself while doing it. Mountain man Josh Kelso had been hard-weaned on some of the bloodiest of the Comanche raids through the Texas border country; "if there was one thing he had been taught to kill quicker than a coiled sidewinder, it was a High Plains horseback Indian." So he had no objection to Custer's plan—until he realized that Chief Black Kettle's bid for peace was sincere—and until he saw the haunting beauty of the Cheyenne girl, Monaseetah, "reed-slender as a willow wand and with a face as delicate as an Egyptian temple carving." Then Josh tried to convince Custer not to attack—tried to instill in him a healthy respect for the fighting ability of the Cheyenne Dog Soldiers—tried to make him believe that Black Kettle meant to keep the peace. But when Josh failed, he consented to lead Yellow Hair to Black Kettle's camp on the Washita, for there was something about the "Boy General" that made men follow him until hell froze over. Whatever happened, Josh was determined to save Monaseetah and live somewhere in peace with her, raising Texas cattle and Kelso children. How he and Custer fought Black Kettle and several hundred Cheyennes in the Battle of the Washita is a part of history excitingly retold here in a powerful novel of Plains warfare by the author of "War Bonnet."

A COMPLETE NOVEL OF CUSTER AND THE WASHITA BATTLE

YELLOW HAIR!

By CLAY FISHER

CHAPTER ONE

Plenty Kills

THE mud-yellow gelding picked up the weary rhythm of his shuffling trot. His alkali-caked rider tensed, restless eyes quartering the darkened prairie beyond the nervous flick of his mount's ears. Shortly he relaxed, the softness of his Sioux-deep voice belying the grim nod which accompanied it.

"There she be, Wasiya. Broad as a squaw's grin and twice as welcome. I allow we won't have no trouble makin' the fort by moonset now."

Ahead lay the glassy shallow sheen of the Arkansas, its broad trace, glimmering ghost-white in the moon-wash, bringing the smell of the first water since sundown. It had been a long, dry forty miles from Fort Larned back there on the branch-waters of the Pawnee Fork and the gelding was thirsty. Black nostrils belling gratefully, the big zebra dun went quickly forward.

When the horse had watered, the man turned him loose to graze, set himself to packing his squat stone pipe with the bright shags of longcut burley, alternating the process with snake-fast glances into the outer darkness. Satisfied, he struck the pocket flint to the shagcut, sucked the tobacco into soul-satisfying life, settled on his heels to stare along the westward track of the Santa Fe Trail.

South Plains-born Joshua Kelso had done the first of his growing right here along the old Missouri-New Mexico Road. Hard-weaned on some of the bloodiest of the Nocone and Kwahadi Comanche raids through the Texas border country, he had been raised by a frontier family whose inherent religion had been God-fearing Christian, but whose acquired creed had been a hatred of white moons and red night riders.

If there was one thing young Josh Kelso had been taught to kill quicker than a coiled sidewinder, it was a High Plains horseback Indian.

Coming to his teens, he had drifted away from home and the Texas frontier, first to follow the scattered fur camps of the last of the Taos and Bent's Fort trappers and latterly to pursue those other callings of the out-of-work mountain man—meat hunting and Indian scouting for the army's border outposts.

It had been a hard, free life, and until the past fall he had found little fault with it. But then, with the War between the States well over and the whole West beginning to be muddied up by the flood of cast-off hardcases turned loose at Appomattox Court House, he had fled the white frontier to seek once more the fastnesses of his beloved mountains, resolved to stay there until he got himself a better idea of what to do with his time and talents than stringing half-prime fox-sets or running cold Indian sign for the cavalry.

Then lo and be blessed if he hadn't got himself that idea, too! Not a fortnight gone. It had to do with Texas cows and Indian Territory grass and the more a man thought on it the better it held up. Only hitch was it would take some fixin's, and fixin's cost money—something Kelso hadn't seen since he'd drawn his last pay voucher from old General Hancock down to Fort Riley the summer of '67.

But what Josh Kelso had ever needed, Providence had always provided.

Right spang in the middle of his need for hard money had come that cussed Osage army scout, prying all over the South Park country, wanting to know where Ota Kte hid his traps, and saying that Yellow Hair wanted him to come at once to the new Soldier Camp on the Arkansas.

Accordingly, since in Plains Indian lingo, *Ota Kte* meant *Plenty Kills* and Plenty Kills meant him, Josh Kelso, and since Yellow Hair meant Captain Custer and the New Soldier Camp meant Fort Dodge over in Kansas Territory, it had all come to his cinching up Wasiya and riding down from the Bayou Salade to hear what the "Boy General" had to say.

And though he was still forty miles short of hearing Custer put it in his own words, he already had a prime hunch what the palaver was going to be about. In his total years as a man-grown on the shortgrass, he'd never seen so many warpaint hostiles as he had in his past week's ride alone. It figured to be sudden hell on the South Plains, mister, and nobody but naked red devils stoking the furnaces.

Kelso knocked the emberless dottle from his Sioux pipe. The quick, good sound of his laugh echoed strangely, lifting Wasiya's curious head from the belly-deep graze of the river swale.

"Come along out'n that Arkansaw feedbin, little hoss. Happen old Yellow Hair figures he's hired himself back a sure-enough Injun fighter, we got to lay our tracks to match up to his ideas. And to them purty, U.S. pay vouchers!"

With the words the mountain man was on his feet, moving with all the noise and effort of a six-foot cat. "And besides, old son—" the voice softened with the big hand which ran, snowflake light, down the gelding's reaching neck—"happen we kin steer Custer scalp-safe through them heated-up hostiles, likely we'll wind up with all the stake we need to garner us that fatgrass spread down yonder in the Nation."

The big scout paused, his hand checking beneath the saddle blanket to see that the gelding was cooled out, sweat-safe. "Sure as sin's for sale in St. Louie, Custer's aimin' to run them redguts off'n the Canadian once for all, come summer again. Once he's did that, there's them million skinny cows south of the Red River dyin' for a mouthful of good grass. And them *ten* million fat Yanks east of the Big Muddy dyin' for a mouthful of good beef."

Kelso paused again, letting the grin sober with the final nod. "Anyhow, old son, I figure any Texas boy with half a belly and no brains kin get rich bringin' them two appetites together."

The gelding grunted to the sudden cinching of the loosened girth, skittered playfully to the mounting weight of the trapper. "Leastways, little hoss, I figure you and me kin do it—"

The mountain man broke his words in midphrase, his whole body stiffening to the westward swing of his narrowed gaze. Straight down the line of the wagon road, five, maybe six miles west, the black of the prairie sky was bleeding to the ugly stain of a freshly lit nightfire. The broken phrase was concluded, grim-lipped, as the trapper heeled the gelding into a hammering gallop.

"Leastways we kin, happen a few hundred South Plains Cheyennes don't meanwhile lift our hair higher than the stink of a stick-poked polecat!"

Big Coon Creek was ordinarily a decently dark and quiet stream. But at 2.00 a.m. of this particular morning of November 13th, 1868, it was anything but dark and quiet at the confluence of the Big Coon and the Arkansas.

The bushel-sized blaze of the fire booming so cheerily on the south banks of the Coon lit up the Santa Fe wagon road for hundreds of feet in either direction, limning the four uniformed figures squatting to its broad glow and bouncing ruddily off the high-sided army freighter whose corded load of stovewood and three-span hitch of weary, hipshot mules formed the backdrop for the fireside group.

First Sergeant Ben Henderson, Company B, 7th United States Cavalry, graciously passed the glazed clay jug of Taos Lightning to his immediate inferior, Corporal Willy Hardermann, and reckoned the time was right for a rousing chorus of the *Battle Hymn of the Republic*. He lost no further moment in starting off the number in a notably sorethroated, bullfrog baritone.

Privates Toland and MacDougal fought valiantly, if six keys sour, for the tenor lead while Corporal Hardermann took what was left, making the least of his coonhound bass in the effort. The harmony had harrowingly struggled to the point where the Lord was about to take a prodigious whack at the wicked "with his turrible swift sword," when MacDougal, the least saturated of the South Arkansas Wood-hauling and Choral Society, suddenly surrendered his bid for first-tenor supremacy to gape up the fire-lit, eastern reaches of the Santa Fe Trail.

The sight which dropped MacDougal's jaw was worthy of the dislocation.

Take six foot-three and plus-190 pounds of bone-gaunt mountain man, cover him with grease-slick Cheyenne buckskins, bristle his slab-rock face with half an inch of hog-wire beard, bore a brace of mean-slit gimlet holes alongside a nose as hooked as a bald eagle's, fill those gimlet holes with a pair of obsidian-hard eyes, and drape the net results in a coat of alkali trail dirt deep enough to be turned with a mold-board plow, and you'd have a mid-dling idea of what the MacDougal mandibles were ajar about.

At least you would if that appari-tion were mounted on a sixteen-hand giant of an arrow-scarred Sioux gelding, unclipped since the past winter of mane, tail, and fetlock, and wild-eyed and wicked-looking as a bull elk whistling up six strange cows.

Kelso slid the lathered Wasiya into a stiff-legged stop, stepped off of him, and went for the wood wagon water keg. In less time than it took MacDou-gal to get his molars back together, the offending blaze was a drowned-out sizzle of steam-clouding embers.

"Don't you jackass jaspers know no better than to build up a bonfire in the bellyhole of hostile Injun country?" Kelso's question hissed in over the angry spit of the drenched coals.

"And *who's* askin'?" With the hostile query, the bear-sized Mac-Dougal was stepping around the steaming firebed.

"Joshua Kelso, soldier—"

"Oh, sure—" the drink-ruffled trooper's scowl relaxed to the spread of the sarcastic grin—"Joshua Kelso! Josh—" the knowing wink went to his three companions—"I want you should meet Jed Smith, Jim Bridger, and Charlie Bent. You know me, of course—Kit Carson!"

"I'm Kelso." The mountain man let it come, flat. "Happen you'd best believe it."

"Sure, you can trust old Kit, Josh!"

"Shut your damn mouth, Jock." First Sergeant Henderson, moving forward over the smoking debris of the fire, was sobering fast. "He's Kelso, all right. I remember him from last summer when Hancock had him out Injun chasin' with Custer."

The soldiers were suddenly no longer questioning the trapper's ident-ity. Joshua Kelso for his later day and time had no less a name than the hairiest of the old Rocky Mountain Rough Brigade. Indeed, it had been Jim Bridger himself who, in recom-mending the young mountain man as a scout to Custer, had described him as the "Lew Wetzel of Wyomin'." When Old Gabe went that far and fancy in labeling a fellow trapper, a man didn't forget it. And as for becoming the enlisted man's hero of any garrison from Fort Huachuca to the Bozeman Road, the surest method was that employed by Joshua Kelso—killing Indians.

"How you bin, Kelso?" the sober-ing sergeant concluded lamely.

"Tolerable. But you boys ain't goin' to be, happen you don't lash up them mules and get the hell shut of this firespot. I got three hundred Cheyenne Dog Soldiers tailin' me a few miles back. Them's Mad Wolf's Dog Soldiers, boys, and they kin see a nightfire as far as I kin."

"Naw!" Henderson's disbelief was sired by hope, not conviction. "Mad

Wolf ain't bin in these parts all summer!"

Kelso ignored the denial to ask pleasantly, "Sergeant, you got any good idea why them Injuns calls me Plenty Kills?"

"You mean them wholesale yarns Custer tells about how you've took off more of them than the smallpox?"

"Somethin' like that." The voice was still easy. "Course it's bin overdid by Custer, like most everything he puts his hand or mouth to. I ain't took to killin' squaws and kids yet, like you army boys."

"What's that to do with Mad Wolf bein' after you?" The nervous noncom overlooked the old service insult to put his edgy question, Kelso shrugging the answer as quietly as though he'd been asked the time of day.

"He somehow heard about Custer sendin' for me again. Right off he tooken himself a pledge to put me under, personal. When a Dog Soldier makes a lodge-vow like that, he makes it good or dies tryin'. Them's the rules of that little society."

"Naw—!"

"For sure, soldier. And for the past six days he's bin tryin' and I bin six, seven times hair-close to dyin'. Mister, when a redgut dogs you night and day for near onto a week, most times so hot you could spit on him happen the wind was right, it gets so you don't need to *see* him. You kin *smell* him. Even in the dark!" Kelso's noncommittal grunt came as he reined Wasiya around. "See you downtrail, soldier."

"Holy cripes!" The trooper's delayed realization of the scout's meaning checked the big trapper's departure. "You mean to say him and *all* them Dog Soldiers is follerin' you, *personal*?"

Once more the dry flick of Kelso's grin kicked up the dust track of its passage across the dirt-powdered jaw, "If he ain't, and if he ain't bin since first I snuck out'n the Bayou Salade six days gone, I bin seein' double a hundred and fifty times over."

Before the sergeant could begin to unravel this brief piece of prairie arithmetic he found himself staring into nothing but South Arkansas darkness. No longer hearing either the fading *clip-clop* of the Sioux gelding's unshod hoofs, or the hurrying trot-jangle of the wood wagons trace chains, now gone, with his three comrades, up the Fort Coon road. He was suddenly and unquestionably alone. Alone with the muttering Arkansas and the muddy swirl of Big Coon Creek—and maybe three hundred of Mad Wolf's Cheyenne Dog Soldiers.

With a startled imprecation that echoed more of present Cheyenne panic than prior Indian-proof conviction, First Sergeant Benjamin Franklin Henderson, Company B, 7th United States Cavalry, wheeled his mount and surrendered the field. Fled without shame or evident shred of regimental regret toward the doubtful sanctuary of sod-roofed Fort Coon.

CHAPTER TWO

Mad Wolf

THE waterlogged embers of the troopers' fire were still fingering the night air of the Arkansas with the wan tendrils of their blue-

wet woodsmoke, when the Dog Soldiers came.

The grease-gray cloudfront of the storm building so rapidly to the southwest the past minutes was now rolling the Arkansas moon belly-deep in its leaden wash, cutting its light, short off. There was just enough left of its fitful illumination to distinguish the figures of the four Indians who rode at once forward from the main pack to the scattered bed of the soldiers' fire.

The first man was of medium height, lean as a sun-dried bone, darkskinned as the smokehóle of a Sioux hunting lodge, his axblade of a face as high of cheekbone and oblique of eye as that of any Mongol Khan. The second was a brute-faced giant, dwarfing the others with his great bulk. The third Cheyenne was a squat, paleskinned man affecting as his personal Big Medicine, a buffalo-skull war bonnet daubed a garish, ocher yellow. The fourth horseman was a very old man, dressed in the simple elkskin shirt and breeches of the rank-and-file Dog Soldier, and wearing the three black eagle feathers, downhanging to the rear of the head, which were the ominous trademark of his ill-famed lodge.

The darkskinned chief broke off his staring at the firebed and signaled to Yellow Buffalo, who in turn swung quickly from his pony to take the old man by the arm and guide him toward the wet coals.

"*Hehe*!" Yellow Buffalo's shout was gleeful. "These are the prints of Ota Kte's pony. There's that crack in the right forehoof. A blind man couldn't miss these prints!"

"*Nenano ononistahe*, shut your mouth and let a blind man see them, then!" The darkskinned chief snarled the barking Cheyenne order with a liplifted grimace of his hand-filed canine teeth that would have identified him even if his next words had not. "Mad Wolf is followed by nothing but fools. Tell me, Old One-" the ugly sound went out of the voice—"am I not right? Are we not very close to him at last?"

Hokom-ooene, the Blind Coyote, let his thin fingers run over the rim of Wasiya's hoofprints. Rubbed and blew upon the delicate members that they might serve him yet more faithfully. "*Hehe*, Axhonehe is right. Ota Kte was here."

"*Etoneeso*? How long ago?"

"A very short time, *onehetto*. There were soldiers here, too. I smell the iron on their mules' feet. *Vehoemap*! The smell of white man's whisky is here on the ground as well. *Hehe*!" The silver-haired oldster's cackle picked up Indian interest. "Maybe they left it behind. Maybe I can find it. Let me smell around here—"

"How many soldiers, Old One?" The blunt question came from the silent giant, Etapeta, Big Body, a rarity among Plains Indians, completely without that consuming interest in the white man's bellyfire which had so long demoralized his fellow savages.

"Three—no wait, four. Yes, four." His answer came from Yellow Buffalo. "One a big man, almost like you, Etapeta. They've gone up this stream—" indicating the Coon—"one riding a horse, the other three in the wagon. *Hee-ahh*, father—" the anxious query went to Blind Coyote—"have you found that whisky yet?"

Mad Wolf scowled, whirled his roan pinto hard around. "You go," he directed Yellow Buffalo. "Take Etapeta and the old man with you. Many thanks, father." He flung the call to the oldster, accompanying the acknowledgement with the quick touch of the finger of the left hand to the brow which was the Plains Indians' sign of highest respect. "*Zeo notaseas*, I go from this place now, after Ota Kte."

It was Big Body's turn to scowl. "After him? You are going after Ota Kte some more now? Without Etapeta?" Big Body was just a little on the safe side of being a complete imbecile. He was a subchief by simple virtue of his one talent—splitting white skulls with his four-foot killing stick, a piece of *bois d'arc* thick as a man's wrist and crotching a six-pound silver-smith's anvil in its forked end.

"I'll go along with you," he concluded. "I want to work on his head with this club after you've taken his hair!" With the words the hulking brave whirled the misshapen war club in a giant swing which came close to decapitating the near-by Mad Wolf.

"*Nonotovetto*!" the enraged chief snarled at Yellow Buffalo. "Get this idiot away from me. Take him and leave in a hurry!" The Dog Soldier leader jabbed toward Big Body with his Sharps buffalo rifle. "*Onehetto*! Go at once or I'll kill him where he sits."

Yellow Buffalo knew the sound of his chief's voice in terminal earnest. Knew that when Mad Wolf dropped his snarl into that gravel-growl he meant bloody business.

"We go," he signaled hastily. "How many do you want us to take?"

"Take a hundred. Beat the ponies with your clubs. You can catch the soldiers easily, then."

Yellow Buffalo looked anxiously skyward. As he did, the last quarter of the moon foundered in the engulfing tide of the thunderhead, and the first fat spatters of the coming rain began exploding their dustbursts in the trail. "I don't know, Axhonehe. It will be pretty black now. How will we follow the soldiers with any certainty?"

"Follow the little stream," growled Mad Wolf. "Like I'm going to follow the big one after Ota Kte. A white man will always ride along the water when he can. *Nataemon*. Good hunting, brother."

With an impatient gesture, Mad Wolf wheeled his roan, barked his own orders to the remaining hundreds of his Indian horsemen. Raced his pony away down the Arkansas without looking back to see whether or not his followers understood or meant to obey his instructions. That they did both was announced by no human word, but only by the hammer of eight hundred unshod hoofs drumming the ruts of the Santa Fe Trail to his rear.

And even that sound died aborning in the sudden cannonading of the South Plains thunder. The moon was completely gone before the first volley of the thunder could echo away across the Arkansas.

Thirty seconds later, the rain was sheeting down in a driving blackness six shades deeper than the pit.

CHAPTER THREE

Lieutenant Colonel Custer

MAD WOLF'S terse prophecy to the contrary, there were white men who did not "always ride along the water when they could," Joshua Kelso being one of them.

It took a man fifteen miles out of his way to cut inland from Big Coon Creek to ride the "dry route" down onto Dodge. It was harder on a tired horse than the straightaway "wet route" along the river. And tougher on a weary rider's saddle-aching seat. But it for sure saved wear and tear on a man's hair.

It was 5.00 a.m. when Kelso topped out on the rearing bluffs that gave the first view of the Arkansas and Fort Dodge from the dry route approach. Five minutes later he was loping past an indignant main-gate sentry, inviting him to embrace the south side of his buckskins if he didn't cotton to the mountain man's version of a proper military pass—an informal salute employing one large hooked nose, a stiff powder-blackened thumb, and four gracefully waving fingers. And further advising the lad that if he didn't like it he could take his troubles to Captain Custer. With Josh Kelso's compliments.

Custer's name caught his eye the third quarters down, along officers' row. But it wasn't the name which held him frowning thoughfully.

Last he'd seen of "the General" he'd been operating under his permanent rank of Captain, and having hell's own time holding onto that. Then word had got into the mountains he'd been courtmartialed and suspended from rank and command for one year. Some tomfool business about having left his command in the field at Fort Wallace while he traipsed off to Fort Riley to catch up on his home life with Mrs. Custer. And getting himself waylaid by old Satanta and a flock of his Kiowa badbloods, enroute, losing a sergeant and two men, killed.

That had sounded like Custer, all right, too. But now, cuss it, so did that neat, new sign pegged up there alongside his office door. By damn, you had to hand it to the little rooster. Rankbroke from Brevet-Major General to Captain, two years ago. Then busted from Captain to plumb nothing less than ten months gone. And now there it was, fresh as porch swing paint and twice as sassy.

Lt. Col. G. A. Custer, Cmdg.

Moving toward the office door, the mountain man balanced the disquieting surprise of the General's five-grade promotion against the growing total of his own doubts.

A man didn't need to be any redskin genius to reckon what lay in store for him beyond that office door. Not if he knew Custer the way Josh Kelso knew him. And not if he knew hostile Indians the way Kelso knew Custer *didn't* know them.

For all the long-haired cavalryman had a War Between the States reputation second maybe only to Little Phil Sheridan's, a man who had scouted for him had to allow that when it came to Indian-savvy and hostile know-how the "Boy General" wouldn't have ranked a chevron higher than a two-stripe corporal. Naturally, a man couldn't help liking the crazy-eyed devil. He was a sure enough he-coon for all his buckskin fringes, cowboy

gauntlets, red silk sashes, and special-made big black hats.

But he-coon or no, to Josh's careful way of figuring such things, Custer was always a sight too quick to set his dandy foot into the buffalo chips before looking to see whether they were safe-dry or still almighty fresh-wet.

The backsweep of his thoughts tightened the jaw of the mountain man, slowed his hand as it started toward the weathered door panels. A moment, only, the hand hesitated. Then it descended with plank-bouncing force.

"Come in, come in! That door will open quite readily, sir! You don't have to beat it through!"

The mountain man grinned. That was Custer for you. It made no never-mind to that one *who* was knocking. It could be Sergeant Jones, General Sherman, Mad Wolf, or God Almighty. The idea was come in, state your business, and don't slam the door on your way out. "The General" was a busy man.

Kelso lifted the latch and stepped in.

Custer was at his desk, scribbling furiously. He didn't even bother to put a comma to the galloping scrawl, much less look up from it. All the mountain man got was a head-jerked "Be with you in a minute, Corporal. As you were—"

Kelso took the "corporal's minute" to sharp-eye the colonel's new quarters. Found them a faithful tintype of the studied bareness of those affected by Custer as a captain at Fort Riley.

The same tired pictures backed the big desk: his adored wife, Elizabeth, looking schoolmarm-prim and pretty in a French lace shawl; the General as an 1863 Brigadier; the General as a two-star Major, posed with Elizabeth and his brother, Tom, *circa* 1865.

There were, too, on the opposite wall, the same two, huge framed chromos of Sherman and Sheridan, his patron saints in the War Department.

Coming to the General, himself, a man couldn't say he'd changed much.

Seemed like maybe his hair was a mite longer and not so yellow. And like his forehead had gained another inch in pushing the skirmish line of his scalp back against the famous Custer curls. That and the fact his jughandle ears looked to be sticking out more than ever and that needle-long nose of his twisting itself more and more to the left all the time.

Beyond that, his twitching, woman-small mouth was still hiding under its sun-bleached droop of haystack mustache and the little ambush of beard on his chin was still doing its damnedest to make him look like he wasn't weakjawed as a pocket gopher. Top that with the fact that when he suddenly looked up at you his varmint-close eyes were as wild-looking as ever, and a man had a fair idea of the way the "Boy General" sat that present morning of November 13th, 1868.

"Joshua, by Heaven!"

The expletive, strongest in a vocabulary religiously disciplined to the proper desires of Mrs. Custer, broke with the rare, friendly flash of the widely spaced upper teeth which hallmarked the renowned Custer grin. It was backed with the cat-quick step around the desk and the firm grip of the small hand.

"I hadn't an idea in the world you would make it in before the fifteenth. But it's good you did, sir, it's good you did. There's work for you and me, my lad. You'll see, you'll see!"

Kelso found himself floundering in the backwash of schoolboy awkwardness this man always set up in him. Standing there grinning and arching his back like a tabbycat getting her tailroot tickled. Cuss it, anyway, a man could sit around all winter hating the little gamecock's innards and vowing he'd never cinch a saddle in his service again. Then the minute he grabbed you and broke out that peg-toothed grin, you were dead. You'd not only follow him to hell and back, but kiss his foot for the chance.

"Do you still have that scabrous old goat of a Sioux buffalo horse? That misbegotten yellow giant of a spavined percheron? How were the trails, sir? And the hostiles? Much activity to the west, Joshua? By the way, sir, speaking of buffalo horses! I have a new Kentucky-bred stallion, Joshua, that will—"

That was Custer for you, again. Talking faster and fancier than a hardshell Baptist preacher unselling a flock of sodbusters on sin. Asking six questions a second and not accepting any answers. Kelso let the interruption ease in as properly as possible.

"Beg pardon, General, but I'm bound to report a mite of trouble before we get onto old times and bull-runnin' hosses. You've got a sergeant and three men standin' hip-deep in Dog Soldiers down yonder by Fort Coon."

"What the devil, Joshua?" There was your second choice in the General's aseptic selection of strong language. "Why didn't you say so instead of standing there wasting my time about buffalo horses?"

Kelso cut loose with the inner grin once more. Trust Custer. He didn't mean it to be that way, but he could lie himself off any spot you could corner him on, and swear over signature he'd trapped you there.

The mountain man rattled it to him, not forgetting a moccasin print of what had passed since his receipt of Custer's message in the Bayou Salade. The little officer simply nodded, swung to the door, whipped it open, and shouted for the Corporal of the Guard. Once the wide-eyed trooper was racing down the company street with the orders for the relief of Fort Coon, he wheeled back to Kelso, dismissing him as curtly as he had greeted him effusively.

"All right, Joshua. Put your horse up and check with Captain Benteen. He'll bring you up to date. We've a fine, red fish due in Dodge tonight, and you can watch me fry him!"

"What you aimin' to fry him in, General?" The question for all its apparent innocence was not lost on Custer, and his answer came with the obvious relish of high overconfidence.

"A kettle, sir, A big, *Black Kettle*!"

Custer was already at the desk, scribbling again, the pen scratching across the rough paper at a hell-for-leather clip that would have done justice to a rush call for all the reserves west of the Big Muddy, his thoughts actually as far from Josh Kelso and Mad Wolf's Dog Soldiers as the distance by express courier from Fort Dodge to Fort Riley—and Mrs. Custer.

The mountain man watched him a moment, then eased out the door to stand with his broad back to the closed panels. Shortly he shrugged, moved on down the path. All right. If Custer wanted to have himself a Cheyenne fish fry, that was his business.

But when it came to dropping a High Plains lunker the size of Black Kettle into the grease pot, a man better stand plenty far back from the fire. Happen he didn't want to get splashed his sudden death of hot Indian fat, he'd better. That was as certain as pumpkins were out of date the first of November.

CHAPTER FOUR

Bad Medicine Night

CAPTAIN Frederick W. Benteen, Custer's Executive and fifth in command, was a plain-faced, quiet man and, to Josh Kelso's way of sizing up such frontier officers, as cautious and head-steady as his illustrious superior was rash and flighty. He received the mountain man not as an old buffalo-hunting crony but as an officer of the United States Army briefing a hired civilian professional on the official points of his employment, past and present.

Benteen stubbed his cigar, leaned quickly forward.

"The situation here has altered rapidly since you left. This spring General Hancock was relieved and Sheridan succeeded him in command of the Department of the Missouri. That's us, Kelso."

The mountain man cocked his head attentively as Benteen continued: "Last January, prior to his dismissal, Hancock negotiated a good treaty at Medicine Lodge Creek, guaranteeing the Indians one million dollars for food, and arms and ammunition for the spring buffalo hunt. However, the minute Sheridan took over he had the appropriation cut in half and its administration turned over to the War Department. In direct treaty violation he withheld all arms and ammunition from the hostiles and since, as you know, Hancock had burned their main camp the previous fall, they were soon desperate. We looked for trouble from Black Kettle and we weren't long getting it. A bad Indian, Kelso, as you well know."

"I never thought so," said the mountain man levelly. "As *you* well know. You army boys ain't never learned to tell a regular Cheyenne from a Dog Soldier. Mad Wolf's your troublemaker, Captain."

Benteen's scowl was returned with Kelso's cool nod. "Just let a hundred hot-tail bucks hit the warpath and Custer'll pile his cavalry into the closest village of peace-treaty Injuns killin' everything they catch in their sights, down to kids and camp dogs."

"I understand your bitterness all too well, Kelso. But I'm afraid the current facts don't bear it out." The officer's scowl was replaced with a thoughtful frown. "Follow this, now.

"The night of August seventh Black Kettle came into Fort Hays to protest his great friendship for us. This was exactly one week after the Cheyenne Agent, Wynkoop, had been granted an issue of arms and ammunition through the Indian Bureau. I have the transcript of Black Kettle's speech if you'd care to verify its 'peaceful' nature."

The mountain man shook his head, and Benteen continued. "Three days later, on the tenth, the Cheyenne began to kill on the Saline River, and on the eleventh crossed to the Solomon. Fifteen settlers killed and five women carried off."

"Anything else?" grunted Kelso.

"That's about it," said Benteen. "Nothing else was needed. When Sheridan got the report on that raid he moved his headquarters to the terminus of the Kansas Pacific at Fort Hays. He's been there since September building up his command and setting up a big field depot a hundred miles south of Dodge. Place called Camp Supply."

"Looks like you soldier boys mean to make an end to it, once for all. That it, Captain?"

"That's it. Custer's pushing Sheridan for immediate command and of course he'll get it. I don't have to tell you where that leaves us."

"Nope. You follerin' him and me leadin' him," the mountain man grimaced. "And better'n five thousand hostiles squattin' out there waitin' for him to waltz us into a blue-ribbon *wickmunke*. That's Sioux for 'trap,' Captain. I reckon all we have to do now is wait for spring and the new grass."

Benteen stood up, signaling the end of the interview. "Right, with one small exception."

"So? How's that?"

"You recall last year Custer pooh-poohed your warning not to try fighting a summer campaign?"

"Sure. You can't catch an Injun, much less kill him, when his ponies is grass-sassy and his own belly full of fat cow."

"Exactly," Benteen nodded. "Well, three weeks ago I transmitted Custer's request to Sheridan for exactly the *winter campaign* you insisted on last year. Sheridan and Sherman have both approved it."

Kelso shook his head. "Cuss it, what's the matter with the General that he would let old Black Kettle come in for another powwow, happen he already knows he's goin' to go after him?"

"There's a girl, Kelso." Benteen let it come flatly.

"Not an Injun, for hell's sake?" The scout's denial was vehement. "By God, I don't believe it. Not of the General. It ain't possible."

"It is with this girl." Again Benteen's statement was flat, but this time he paused, mustering his simple soldier's vocabulary for a squad of superlatives adequate to his low-voiced conclusion.

"Kelso, she is the most fantastically beautiful woman I have ever seen."

The mountain man stood up, clearly unimpressed, turning for the door with his noncommittal grunt. "I allow we'll see, Captain."

"*You'll see*, Kelso." The little emphasis was lost on the departing scout. "Leave the door open, will you, please."

"She's open. See you downtrail, Captain—"

With a nod and a suspended grunt, the trapper was gone, gaunt shoulders hunching to the loose swing of his narrow-hipped gait, leaving the frowning officer to stare after him, wondering how a man could listen and talk so like a man—yet look and walk so like a wolf!

Upon leaving Benteen's office, Kelso repaired to the post sutler's store, there to palaver with his fellow scouts on the sour look of the Indian situation. Outside the store, he recognized the hipshot mounts of half a dozen of Custer's scout corps; Apache Bill's, Jimmy Morrison's, Ben Clark's, California Joe's, and a couple of others. Good, by damn. Maybeso the situation wasn't as bad-clabbered as it looked. These sons could sure tell him.

In the ensuing, hair-bellied half hour with his fellow professionals, together with the necessary destruction of the clay jug of Taos Lightning inherent in any such forgathering of the curdled cream of the frontier, he found his hopes well justified. The situation, indeed, was not as bad as it looked.

It was a hell of a lot worse.

He was still scowling savagely when, hours later, his head full of red figures and his belly of raw, white whisky, he door-banged his way out of Bob Wright's evil-smelling emporium to climb on Wasiya and head him for the council grounds, word having just come from Benteen that Colonel Custer requested the presence of his pet scout, the approaching Indian column having just been sighted winding up the Arkansas.

It was 7.20 p.m., Friday, November 13th. A wineglass-clear, dead-quiet fall evening, the gray-yellow of the departed sun still eerily lamplighting the floor of the broad valley. The kind of an evening a mountain man didn't like. Too quiet. Too clear. Too smoke-still. The pure hush of it putting a man's nerves on edge. Keeping his eyes working the prairie constantly. His ears straining for the first crack of a sound that would read Indian trouble.

It was a Bad Medicine Night, and Josh Kelso could smell it just as sure as he could the stink of a sick dog.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Sacred Pipe

ALL human sound ceased. As Kelso sat watching, he was conscious only of the snaffling and shifting of the hundreds of Indian ponies, and of the muffled clinking of the arms and harness of their riders. Without awaiting Custer's directions, he raised both hands, palms out, toward the Indians. It was the universal prairie hand-sign of peace. Behind it, he sent his deep voice, rapidly intoning the heavy Cheyenne gutturals.

"*Vahe, nomoto, nomoto.* You are welcome among us." He slashed his right hand down and across his left forearm in the hand-sign, taken from their war custom of cutting off the left arms of their enemies, identifying the Cheyenne. "You are welcome in this camp. Our people are at peace with yours. Yellow Hair, Heovemeaz, has bid me tell you this."

In response to the friendly ripple of "*Haus*!" which ran the Cheyenne lines, the scout touched his forehead, continued gravely. "*He-hau*, who is chief among you? Which is Moxtaveto, the Black Kettle?"

The mountain man had never seen the notorious hostile, knew him only as the headchief of the Cheyenne village massacred in peaceful camp at Sand Creek four years earlier by the ill-famed Colonel Chivington and his

murdering Colorado Militia. He was, accordingly, scarcely prepared for the answer to his question.

A wrinkled oldster clad in the simplest of white elkskins and armed only with a three-foot ceremonial pipe, urged his potbellied mount forward.

"*Hau*, I am chief, here. I am Black Kettle." The deep voice was soft as new snow, the placid face behind it calm as a mountain lake at sunset. Kelso's upset was obvious.

"*You* are Moxtaveto, father?"

"Aye, and you, my son?"

"You know me, father—"

For the first time in his life the mountain man felt ill at ease in front of an Indian. The simple dignity of the old man was overpowering. Made a man feel all at once wrong inside. Made him hate to put the name into the harsh Sioux words that had made it infamous among these people.

"—I am Ota Kte."

He had known the old man knew who he was. Just as the bulk of his dead-still followers must have known. He was, nevertheless, jolted by the ugly murmur which ran among the slit-eyed ranks at the sound of the hated name.

"*Hau*, I know you, my son." The surface of the leathered face didn't alter a wrinkle. "Your heart is bad for my people."

"Only for those among them whose hearts are bad for my own people; you know that, Moxtaveto." Kelso returned the answer, level-eyed, knowing the truth in it, and knowing the old man knew the truth in it, too.

"Your heart is bad," the old chief reiterated. "You have killed too many. Your tongue is straight, Ota Kte, but your heart is bad."

The mountain man shrugged, turned to the impatient Custer.

"Tell him to bring his subchiefs only." The little officer's instructions were terse. "Have him bring them to the tent just beyond the fort. All the others will remain right here where they are."

Kelso repeated the order to Black Kettle who, though understanding considerable English, generally refused to admit the fact or use the language. As the old chief began tolling off Yellow Hair's words to his waiting braves, the mountain man found Custer suddenly at his side again, his excited voice held down to play under the ear-range of his attending staff.

"And, Joshua, tell him he *must* bring Monaseetah. Do you understand, sir?"

Kelso nodded, spurred his gelding toward the Cheyenne leader's. The disappointed hundreds of the tribe were already beginning to dismount and set up temporary camp as he rode up to Black Kettle.

"All right, father, let's go. Yellow Hair wants you to bring Monaseetah, too."

"How is that, my son?" The concern in the old man's voice was genuine, narrowing Kelso's eyes.

"Monaseetah was the name he gave me, father—"

"*Havsevestoz nivehohavo*," Black Kettle muttered uneasily, the old Cheyenne phrase narrowing the mountain man's gaze yet further.

"Why do you say that, father? Why do you say it's a bad thing and you don't like it?"

In answer, Black Kettle called into the darkness beginning to shroud his

dismounting followers. "Emoonesta. come to my side!"

Kelso translated the name as he watched the summoned brave swing aboard a small paint mare and move away from the blurred group. *Emoonesta*, Bright Hair. Kind of a tame name for a Cut Arm buck. A man couldn't make much out of it save to see how the General had messed it up to make "Monaseetah" out of it. As a matter of fact, a man couldn't see too much to the whole business. Couldn't see for one thing why the boys at Bob Wright's had grinned when they'd told him Monaseetah was Custer's personal interpreter. Couldn't see, for another, what earthly use there'd be for another interpreter with him, Josh Kelso, fronting the council fire. Couldn't see—

The mountain man's difficulty in "seeing" vanished as his lean jaw slacked open; as the settling dark opened to admit the hand-close approach of the paint pony; and as the hush of the Arkansas evening fell apart to the powder-soft caress of the low voice.

"I am here, father. Let us go."

Kelso didn't hear the old chief's answer, nor his invitation for the mountain man to join them in riding to Yellow Hair's fire. He simply sat and watched them pass in the inky dusk, his whole gaunt body tight-strung as a warbow gut-string.

And when the prairie black had closed behind them and his unbelieving mind had fought itself to a standstill for a word or a thought or a single iota of an idea on how to say it, there was still no way to beat Benteen's straightout, wide-eyed honesty, no matter it was nearly plumb dark, nor you'd sneered at Indians your whole life.

That girl *was* the most fantastically beautiful woman that ever drove a mortal man's heart square through the roof of his dumb-open mouth.

The Council got under way at 8.00 p.m., the full shade of the prairie night having drawn itself across the western horizon to outline the leaping flare of Custer's bonfire and the close-packed circle of savage red figures seated crosslegged before it.

Custer, himself, with Kelso and Benteen, was seated in the opening of the big Sibley, Custer and Benteen in camp chairs, Kelso squatting on the ground to the latter's left. Within the tent, a staff non-com sat to the wind guttering light of a hurricane lantern, rough paper and goose quill to hand, waiting to transcribe the pathetic minutes of the last formal peace talk of a great Indian Nation. What he would write would be the carefully deleted wording of a palpably honorable hearing. What he would sign would be the dishonorable death warrant of a proud and ancient people.

Least aware, of all present, of the foreshadowing cloud of War Department intrigue and over-ambitious field-commander infamy, was the hawk-headed figure of Joshua Kelso, Custer's Indian-hunting scout and court favorite. Indeed, infamy, intrigue, and over-weaning ambition were the furthest subjects from the mountain man's mind.

After ten years of warding off every civilized shaft of Eros winged his way

by a hot-eyed succession of frontier belles of properly pale skin, Kelso had been shot dead center by a pagan Cheyenne cupid!

He shifted uncomfortably, gulped in another mouthful of Arkansas night air, scowled at the smiling Custer and the blank-faced Benteen. Cuss it all, why couldn't they get on with it? Rather than Custer sitting there grinning and folding his arms like a heathen Chinee statue? Forcing the Cheyenne to lose face by making the first talk? Why, in the name of—

Kelso's irate inner wanderings were cut sharp off. Black Kettle had arisen, stepped slowly forward, the smoldering ceremonial pipe cradled in his arms. The Fort Dodge Council was in session.

The mountain man watched, fascinated. He had sat to more than a few informal horseback palavers between the Indian and the army cavalry. But this was his first full-dress meeting. It presented a disturbing picture. One he was never to forget. A picture the flame-lit delineations of which burned themselves deep into his mind, creating the first foothold for the doubt which had been working at him ever since meeting the old Cheyenne patriarch earlier in the evening—the growing, still formless, unreasonable doubt of his own true feelings toward these still-faced red nomads.

The compelling figure of the aged Cheyenne held the white audience in complete silence. He remained standing for perhaps ten seconds, the copper parchment of his face upturned to the answering silence of the Arkansas stars. Then, quickly, he drew upon the pipe, blowing the smoke first east, then west, north and south, intoning between the puffs the sacred peace prayer inscribed on the stone bowl of the Holy Medicine Pipe of the Cheyenne Nation. After that, he stepped slowly forward, placed the pipe on the ground between himself and Custer, squatted crosslegged to face the army commander.

As the full light of the fire fell on the pipe, Kelso's eyes widened. His words, side-mouthed to Benteen, were tense. "That's *the* pipe, Captain. Their Holy Medicine Pipe. Captain, that old man *means* to make peace this time!"

"Better tell the Colonel—" Benteen was disturbed by the mountain man's intensity—"I don't believe he's noticed it."

"Hoss feathers! He knows that pipe. He had his hands on it at Medicine Lodge Creek. By damn, Captain, I don't cotton to the smell of this meetin'."

Kelso's bitterness was broken into by the appearance of a figure which took his and every white male mind within eyeshot far away from the political morals of the moment. Monaseetah, absent until now, had "come to the meeting."

As she moved slowly into the fire's full light, taking her place silently at Black Kettle's side, Kelso's eagerness for his second sight of her was reined short up by his simultaneous marking of Custer's extreme agitation. The General was leaning tensely forward in his chair, slender hands clutching the oak arms, pale eyes diamond-bright and following the girl like a man bewitched. Noting the fact, the mountain man shrugged it off. There wasn't a commissioned eye

among Custer's stiff-backed staff that wasn't glittering just as hard.

The girl was slight and reed-slender as a willow wand, moved gracefully as a mountain rush in a spring breeze. She was clad in the single-piece doeskin camp dress of the unmarried Cheyenne woman, her small knees, curving calves and slim ankles, as well as her rounded arms and hollowed shoulders, copper-naked in the shifting firelight. A man, any man, would have no more than just time to get that body glance of her before his eyes were holding on that face, with no first thought for anything else.

It was oval, not broad and flat like most Cheyenne women's. Oval and delicate and unreal as an Egyptian temple carving. High and slanting of cheek-bone. Straight-bridged and short of nose, with none of the tribal Mongol breadth of nostril. Square and clean of mouth, with both lips full rich and that double-lobed underlip pouting out in just that moist, curving way that drove a man to short-breathed desire.

Kelso was still fighting for his breath when Black Kettle resumed his peace talk, breaking the spell the Indian girl had put upon the officer corps of Custer's 7th and returning the council to impatient order. With the old chief's remarks concluded, Kelso turned to Custer, waiting for the girl to come forward with her translation.

To his unpleasant surprise the pale-eyed officer broke his stare away from Monaseetah and snapped at him, "Well, well, what are you waiting for, sir? What did he say? The same old drivel?"

Kelso narrow-eyed him, for the first time wondering what kind of an interpreter the girl was. He shrugged quickly, then, and repeated the sense of Black Kettle's statement.

"He says this time there's got to be peace. He's seen the soldiers at Fort Hays with his own eyes. His Agent has told him why they are there. He says there mustn't be no winter war. I allow he means it this time, General. That's the Big Pipe he's put on the ground, there. You know what that means."

"I know what it's supposed to mean. Is that all he said?" Custer's voice was too brittle, too quick-jumping.

"That's all, General, but I think you'd best listen to him. I allow he really means it—"

"Thank you, sir. I'll do the thinking." With the curt nod Custer continued, "Tell him exactly what I say, Joshua, and see that you don't change any of it.

"Tell him," repeated the little officer, rising dramatically to roll out the offer in his best War-Between-the-States, Surrender-at-Appomattox style, "that I assert, and all candid persons familiar with the subject will sustain the assertion, that of all classes of our population the army entertains the greatest dread of an Indian War, and is willing to make the greatest sacrifices to avoid it."

The mountain man scowled, his mind twisting to the task of cramming the high-flown peace feeler into simple Cheyenne, his heart at the same time somehow glad that Custer was accepting the old man's proposal. Right now, with Black Kettle bidding and the Boy General buying, a mountain son could see his cow ranch in the

Nation floating off down the North Canadian. Somehow, again, he didn't give a damn. Actually he was relieved and maybe even a little tickled about it. Showed it, too, with the little flick of a grin he flung Black Kettle ahead of Custer's reply.

"Father, uncover your ears. I have a good thing to tell you. Yellow Hair says he is ready to do anything to bring peace along the Arkansas. He says it is up to you."

Black Kettle slowly raised the finger tips of his left hand to his forehead, sweeping them in turn toward Custer. "Tell Yellow Hair that Black Kettle hears his words and that his heart is full. Tell him my people go home, now."

Turning away, the Cheyenne leader paused, nodded thoughfully to Kelso. "I do not understand you, Ota Kte. You hate my people, yet I heard you speak in your tongue to Yellow Hair and I heard him reply to you. Your heart was better than his."

The mountain man felt the strange thrill of the words but his own eyes and thoughts were suddenly no longer on the problems of Black Kettle or any part of the Cheyenne Nation save that slender portion of it so maddeningly wrapped in the clinging doeskins of Monaseetah. The girl in turn and for no reason a man could righly fathom was all slant black eyes for Joshua Kelso. As their eyes met, her full lips curved into that haunting trace of a smile that has stampeded the sons of Adam ever since Eve shed her first fig leaf.

"I don't understand myself, father. Not any more—" The long-delayed words went to Black Kettle but the narrowed eyes remained with the Indian girl. Monaseetah returned the look, long stare for long stare, then dropped her lashes as the old chief broke the spell by moving to leave.

As he did, the forgotten Custer was suddenly at Kelso's elbow.

"Hold them up, Joshua!" The little officer's voice was held down, his light eyes watching Black Kettle. "I want to know where these Indians are going to winter. Ask them where their camp will be. *Exactly.* Do you hear? I want to know the precise river and the specific part of it they will pitch their lodges on. Don't be forceful about it. I don't want to alarm them. We already have the information. I simply want to verify it."

The mountain man nodded. The General appeared a mite tensed for a man that just wanted to know where his red friends were going to spend their Christmas holidays. Especially for one who claimed he already knew. He put the thought aside, turned to Black Kettle with the question.

"On the Washita," replied the old Cheyenne unhesitatingly. "South a short day's pony ride from the first fork. West a little from the Antelope Hills. It will not be hard to find."

Kelso touched his forehead. "Yellow Hair thanks his brother. *Nataemnon.* Good hunting, father."

"*Nataemnon,*" grunted Black Kettle, swinging aboard his pony. "Ride in peace. We will meet again."

"Aye, father, we will. And *you,* girl—" the mountain man's eyes abandoned Black Kettle, sought out Monaseetah—"we will meet again!"

"*He-hau vehohetan*! Yes, white man—" the girl's words were softer than the smile behind them—"we *will* meet again. Remember that!"

Kelso was still staring after her when he turned to find Custer gone and Benteen at his side.

"Colonel Custer wants to know where that camp will be. What did the old devil say?"

"On the Washita, south of Wolf Creek, west of the Antelope Hills country," the scout grunted.

"Well, that ought to be close enough, even for Custer. The poor devils."

The way he said it stepped squarely on the baitpan of Kelso's lingering Indian doubts. Brought him twisting around, his Sioux-dark scowl hard as the core of an unbored rifle barrel.

"How was that, Captain Benteen?" he asked.

"Just like I said it—" Benteen let his lips shrink, the taste of the words sour even in a regular-army mouth—" 'the poor devils.' The Seventh is moving out in forty-eight hours—for Camp Supply."

"And from Camp Supply?" It was a challenge, not a question.

"To the Washita. 'South a short day's pony ride from the first fork. West a little ways from the Antelope Hills.' "

There was no mistaking the deliberate mimicry of Black Kettle's freely given directions. No misreading the disgust in Benteen's tight-lipped irony. Nor of the brutal reason therefor.

Custer had set a white *wickmunke* for Moxtaveto, the Black Kettle of the Southern Cheyenne.

And the child-simple old warrior had walked straight into it.

CHAPTER SIX

The Devil's Brand

THE two scouts squatted in the moon-black shadow of the stable. Kelso just finishing his jaw-thrust account of Custer's handling of Black Kettle. There was silence for a long minute, then, while both of them listened to the stall noises of the 7th's horses. Presently California Joe, Custer's nominal chief of scouts, wagged the black brush of his beard, let his question come slow and thoughful.

"How does he do it, Josh? How in tarnation hell does he keep gettin' away with it?"

"You tell me, Joe. You bin with him longer."

The grizzled scout shrugged. "Only him and God knows, Josh, and neither of them's tellin'. He's already bin through a court-martial and two General Reports that would have busted a four-star general to a buck private. You recollect the ones I mean. Them two affairs down in Texas where they called him up for rough-handlin' his men and abusin' his command?"

"Yeah, I reckon. Seems like he kin lead a sanitary detail through a ten-foot trench of bull chips and come out smellin' like a rambler rose."

"He kin. I allow he's the luckiest army buzzard ever broke a good officer for smokin' on Sunday, or shot down a batch of homesick recruits for runnin' away from dog-rotten food and billets a sick rat wouldn't sleep in."

Kelso nodded slowly. "Happen you're right, Joe. I reckon he ain't got a real friend in the world."

"Savin' yourself, he ain't." California Joe's head-chuck was half

agreement, half question. Kelso picked up the challenge, handed it shortly back.

"How about you, Joe? And Jimmy Morrison and Ben Clark and the others?"

The older scout shook his head, his answer as genuine as the puzzle of the frown that went with it.

"By God, I dunno, Josh. Somehow a man will leave fat cow and prime fixin's to foller him on moldy biscuit and blowflied fatback. I done it. You done it. We all done it. But how come the tarnal hell we done it, that's what's got me chasin' my tail."

Kelso took his time, his words coming in that low, slow way a western man will take when all the bluffs are in and the last raise called.

"I allow I kin tell you, Joe. Custer ain't like other men. He ain't the same breed. He don't think he is, and he ain't. There's men that allows no man's as bright as them. It ain't that it's so, mind you, but *they* think it is. And, for them, that makes it so.

"They kin answer any question. They kin tote up any sum. They kin rassle any bear and pin any bull. There ain't nothin' kin beat them and no way they kin lose. Not in their own minds, there ain't.

"Custer's that way, Joe. It ain't bred in a man, neither. Take his brother, Tom. Tom's the same mother and he's the same daddy, but he ain't the same man. He ain't no more like the General than you nor me. Tom's human, and you and me are human. The General ain't, Joe.

"I allow it's some kind of almighty lightning strikes a man to make him like Custer. It don't strike often and it don't never strike twice in the same place. When it does strike a man it sets up a fire in him that'll burn him plumb to death before he's done. And it'll burn plenty of them that's standin' too close to him, too. But all the same, when the Big Dark comes and such as you and me ain't no more than tromped-out coals, the General will still be burnin' bright enough to see from here to kingdom come."

The young mountain man paused, seeking the words that came at eye-squinted last:

"He's got the Devil's Brand on him, Joe, and you and me and all the others of us that's wild inside will foller him. Not alone till hell freezes over, but until it's frosted clean down to where the fires are froze, solid-out."

The older scout, his simple mind stumbling along in bewilderment behind this unprecedented outpouring from a man he'd never before heard string more than twenty words together, was still several strides off the pace when Kelso, himself as surprised as California Joe at the unwonted eloquence and no little embarrassed as well, was hurriedly knocking out his pipe and rising with awkward haste to stride away down the grateful cover of the stable building's shadow.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Monaseetah's Promise

KELSO tossed restlessly on the clean straw of Wasiya's stall. For a fall night getting on into winter, it seemed uncommon hot. The cussed hay appeared bent on jabbing a man every time he turned. On top of that, the drumming and chanting from the Cheyenne camp

beyond the stockade was keeping Wasiya gingered up.

After an hour of trying, the mountain man gave it up. Admitted it wasn't the gelding stomping around the stall nor the ki-yiying from the Indian fires that was keeping his eyes wide. With the thought of the girl, he grinned suddenly. Happen a man was used to sneaking around hostile situations where any noise lustier than a mouse sneeze could mean his hair, it wouldn't be any trick at all to slide in and out of this sloughfoot soldier camp. What Custer didn't find out about, he scarce could squawk on. And besides, happen a man wanted to see that Indian girl again, he'd best be about it. The Cheyenne camp would be clean gone come daylight.

Fort Dodge was built in a rough half-moon circle, the two points based on the Arkansas. Back from the river a way was a twenty-foot bluff where the main barracks of the enlisted men were dug-in and sod-roofed over. Once down that bluff and past the sod shanties a man had only to hit for the river, drift south a spell, and cut back in across the open prairie.

Ten minutes after the give-in thought struck him, Kelso was skirting the Arkansas willows. Five minutes after he was shadowing in on the Cheyenne camp.

The camp was a big one and it spread out over a quarter mile of wide open plains. There was nothing a man could properly draw a bead on for his sneakup save maybe the big cowskin cone of Black Kettle's ceremonial lodge. Otherwise there wasn't a tipi pitched in the whole layout, making a man's approach about as private as a two-hundred-pound black bear crossing a six-hundred-yard snowslide.

Right about now a man began wondering what he was doing out there all by his lonesome. But happen he was billy-hell-bent on seeing the girl, he'd best stop wondering and get to moving. Setting his jaw, the mountain man dropped to his knees, began snaking forward toward the silhouette of Black Kettle's lodge, careful to keep its bulking form squarely between himself and the bouncing light of the dance fires.

At the rear of the lodge he took another long think about how bad he wanted to see Monaseetah, the guttural barking of the dancing braves, not forty feet from him now, stiffening his determination not nearly so much as it did the short hairs on the back of his neck. Gritting his teeth, he lifted the rear covers and went under.

He was luckier than any mountain jackass who would deliberately belly-sneak in on five hundred celebrating Cheyennes had any mortal right to be.

"*Niva tato*? Who is that?" The deep voice muttered the challenge from behind the pinpoint glow of the smoldering pipe, not six feet from Kelso's intruding nose.

"*Nanehov nihoe*! It is I, father. Your friend, Ota Kte."

"Ota Kte!"

"Aye, father. Gently there with the Holy Iron. I have come to ask your help, Old One. As a son to a father."

The old Cheyenne nodded, lowering the rifle, motioning him forward. "You are very foolish to come into this camp in such a way. I could have shot you. The pony guards could have

shot you. Yellow Hair would have called it murder."

The mountain man squatted cross-legged on the buffalo robe, facing the old man. He returned the nod soberly.

"You could, and he would," he agreed succinctly. "But I could not let him know that I was coming here. He would not understand that, father."

"It is the girl, then?" The old man's question fell softly, startling the mountain man with its certain insight.

"Now how do you say that, father?" he countered awkwardly.

"*Haheneeno*," the Cheyenne leader shrugged, "an old man knows these things. When a young brave is not at war he will risk his scalp for two things alone. Food in his belly. A woman in his blankets."

"I must talk to the girl, father. I see you understand these things and I am glad. When I saw her today my heart was behind my eyes."

"*Hah*!" the oldster grunted. "It was in front of your eyes. Any fool could see that."

"You will bring her here, then? Here to your tipi? I ask it, father. My fingers are touching the brow."

"Only a moment, yes. Axhonehe has come in with the Dog Soldiers. They are at the dance. One must beware of that. The squaws, too, will soon return from the fires. It is late and we travel early."

Kelso waited in the half gloom of the tipi, his mind moving uneasily to the news of Mad Wolf's arrival in the camp, the seconds seeming to grow into hours before the old man's form again blotted the firelit triangle of the entrance flap. Behind him moved a willow-slender form that brought the thick blood hammering through the mountain man's wrists and temples, disrupting all thoughts of Mad Wolf or any living human save the one his eyes were now riveted on.

"*Vahe Veho*!" The low voice went through Kelso, leaving him weaker than a new-wet kitten. "You are welcome, White Man. You make my eyes glad again."

As the dumbfounded scout struggled for his answer Black Kettle's warning mutter was falling. "Talk quickly now. You have only a minute. The dance is ending. Remember, my heart is good for both of you. I will be outside. When you hear the grass hawk whistle, you will know it is time."

With that he was gone, the heavy silence closing behind him as Kelso's eager eyes strained across the tipi darkness.

He could make her out, now, silhouetted against the firelight of the flap opening. Poised and graceful as an antelope doe. Slender waist, clean legs, curving buttocks, and tilting, saucy breasts as sharply drawn as a black-glass etching. He had only time to see that and to thrill to the sudden perfume of the wandering night breeze which bore the heated, subtle trace of her body fragrance across the tipi, when she was speaking.

"We have no time, *Veho*! Listen to me. I know what is in my heart and what is in yours. When you looked at me I did not think of Ota Kte, the killer of my people. I thought only of the White Man I was seeing. Such a *Veho* as I had never seen before—"

"You listen to me, girl!" Kelso, his mind holding to the hard facts of the time and place, interrupted her. "We can't talk of these things now. I

came here that you might tell me how I can find you when your people leave this camp. You told me at Yellow Hair's fire that we would meet again. Tell me *when* that will be, Bright Hair, and *where*!"

"I had not forgotten, *Veho*. Had you not come, I would have sent for you." With the thrill of this new promise tightening the pull of his indrawn breath, the girl hurried on. "The fourth sun from tonight, when that sun is sinking. There is a place on the South Road, beyond the Arkansas. A spot near the next river. Where the spring is, and the big grove of trees. Do you mark the place, *Veho*?"

"Middle Spring," said the mountain man swiftly. "On the Cimarron. Past the Dry Crossing, past the Jornada. Is that it, girl?"

"That is it, *Veho*. Monaseetah will be there. We will talk and you can show me with your hands what I have already seen in your eyes!"

The way she said it, the words low and fierce, brought Kelso to his feet. Took him in two strides across the darkened lodge. Put his big hands to seizing the cool roundness of her arms, high up near the pits where the pressing thumbs of them were suddenly tensing to the warm, firm sidethrust of the upper breasts swelling nakedly past the loose confines of the camp dress's armslits. Sent his wide lips smashing downward into the upturned, thirsty demand of her parted mouth.

The quick-drawn quaver of the night hawk's whistle broke the brutal kiss in mid-demand, sending the girl back and away from Kelso, and ducking shadow-swift through the aperture of the tipi flap. Leaving the mountain man with nothing between him and Black Kettle's promised announcement of the approach of his squaws, save the hot perfume of her body against the clinging sweat of his buckskins, and the salt and the blood of her torn mouth against the harsh clamp of his lips.

For a moment he remained motionless, breath laboring, muscles refusing to slacken. Then belated discretion proving the better part of valorous passion, he dove and rolled under the rear skins of the lodge, coming erect and tense outside them, even as the close Cheyenne grunts announced the arrival of Moxtavetò's squaws within them.

For the first time in twelve hours Kelso allowed himself the granite luxury of his full grin. Then he turned and slid quickly away toward the protecting shadow of the grazing Indian pony herd.

If it was a laugh the mountain man meant to have there back of Black Kettle's lodge, it was as well it was a silent one. For with the Cheyenne, as with any Indians, the last smile went to the one who took the scalp.

And Emoonesta, the Bright-haired One, was a Cheyenne.

She was still smiling, wicked-lipped and softly, long after the peaceful pony herd had closed behind the fading form of Ota Kte, the Indian Killer.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Trap on the Cimarron

EARLY evening of the 17th found the Camp Supply column safely across the Jornada and night-camped at Lower Springs of the

Cimarron. The following day's march would be that to the Middle Springs, and Kelso asked and received Custer's permission to ride ahead and scout it for the column.

He rode only far enough out of the straggling camp to be well shut of it for an early start in the morning. A man wanted his eyes and ears sharp for tomorrow's ride and the best way Kelso knew to whet both was with about eight hours good sleep. Unsaddling Wasiya, he picketed him close to the river, was dead to the world in a matter of seconds. He came awake around 4.00 a.m., saddled up and moved out.

He saw nothing in that morning's wary ride, stopped to water and graze the gelding about 10.00, mounted up and rode on. It had turned blazing hot for a November day the way it freakishly will in the Arkansas country, and between him and Middle Spring, now, the river cover was that thin it wouldn't shade a short lizard. By the time he sighted the cottonwoods and willows of the spring, he was sweat-hot and ready for water.

Cautiously scouting the perimeter of the grove, he rode in to find Middle Spring as inviting as ever, its gushing well of spring water and the eighty-foot pool of the river footing it, striking a desert-wilted mountain man as real prime fixings.

Of course he hadn't ridden clean upstream and there was a growth of river willow up the gorge yonder that would hide the approach of a sizeable party of redskins. But that growth had been too still to even give it a second look. After enough years at it, a man developed a feel for things like that stretch of brush.

The hell with it. Right now everything was sitting pretty at Middle Spring of the Cimarron, and a man could tend to himself for a change. All he had to do now was lay around and wait to see if the girl actually meant to show.

Following a long drink from the spring, Kelso dragged Wasiya's saddle over to a handy sun clearing, loaded his pipe, and stretched out on the short curl of the buffalo grass.

Ah! That was more like it, mister. Nothing like a stone bowl of shagcut and a twenty-minute catnap to lift a man's troubles.

Or maybeso his scalp. . . . .

The first hint the dozing Kelso had that all wasn't well along the Cimarron was when a chance, sleepy-eyed glance showed him Wasiya flaring his curious nostrils toward the far edge of the clearing.

It had to be Indians coming, even though he'd padded a circle around the lower grove as cautious as an old dog lying down in tallgrass snake country. There was still that cussed upper grove. So what in hell did a man do now? Sprint for his gun? Stand there with his arms folded, hoping maybe they'd take him for the second coming of Anpetuwi, the White Sun God? Or go diving into the hand-close brush where maybe he could get ten seconds to think?

Kelso didn't waste any time messing around with his choice. He dove. The shade in that brush was as cool as the low laugh that came with it.

The mountain man whirled, plastering his back to the nearest sapling, sun-blinded eyes squinting to adjust to the shadows of the tangle. The

laugh came again and with it this time some words in a guttural tongue Kelso had cut his second teeth on.

"*Vahe Veho*! Welcome to my tipi, White Man!"

If a man had thought Monaseetah looked good in the flicker of Custer's council fire or the tipi dark of Black Kettle's lodge, he had a second think coming in the cool, daylight shadow of Middle Spring grove.

She was a little thing, less than armpit high to Kelso, very light copper in color. Her level eyes sparkled black as split obsidian and she had that rare, mahogany-auburn hair you sometimes saw in the Sioux and Cheyenne. Her features were as regular as a highbred white woman's and her figure, hardly damaged by the cling of the thin elk-skins, was like none you'd ever seen on a white woman, high *or* lowbred.

"*Vahe*, Ota Kte—" she repeated the snowflash of her smile—"I am here for your eyes to see. And for your hands to hold."

"All right, girl—" He moved toward her with the heavy words, his ears suddenly closed to all danger, his eyes seeing nothing but the full-bodied look of her standing there staring at him.

She stepped away from him, out into the open sunlight, the smile playing again, her mood shifting as quick as a prairie breeze.

"Do you swim, *Veho*? As good as a Cheyenne?"

The impish suggestion stopped the mountain man. "I dunno," he started in English, then switched gruffly to Cheyenne: "How good can a Cheyenne swim?"

"This good, *Veho*!" The answer was muffled by the upsweep of the elk-skin dress as it went off over her head to be carelessly flung on the grass, and by the following, silvery splash of her clean body knifing the quiet surface of the Cimarron.

Kelso, his natural elements associated more nearly with the proximity of his britches to a horse's back, or his moccasins to the feel of prairie grass, was no great shakes in the water. He waded grinningly across the shallow stream and hauled out on a mid-channel sandbar to watch her.

By damn, here was a woman. A man was beginning to know that. Ride, shoot, build a fire—just let a jasper name it and she could do it. Happen she could bead a moccasin, gut game, pound pemmican, and boil dog, too. But what the hell, was that against her? Was it, happen a man was thinking of setting up a cow ranch right in her Arkansas backyard? And thinking, too, of asking her in as a fifty-fifty partner? Watching her turning body in the water, Kelso found himself thinking it wasn't. Happen him and the Indian girl were cut to size, right along.

She was out of the water, then, coming to sit crosslegged before him with the smiling request that he try his clumsy hands at a task they must, like any proper Cheyenne husband's, become accustomed to—the care of his woman's hair. In this case, the unlinking of the thick braids that the tawny hair might dry in the milk-warm wash of the Cimarron's evening breeze.

The hearing of her simple request, along with its innocent implication of her future being accepted as that of "his woman," brought a loneliness

and longing into him he had never known. Such as the poignant feeling was, however, he did not let it interfere with the business to hand: that of the braids. When he had got them undone with a deftness which well might have led the Indian girl to wonder just how much practice he'd had, she shook her head to fluff the hair out, speeding the process with quick, flinging motions of her hands. In a matter of seconds the red-gold mane shone like burnished metal against the tiger glow of her skin.

Now, when Kelso would go to sliding his arm behind her neck, she moved quickly to her feet, glancing apprehensively at the late angle of the sun, counseling a prompt return to shore. He arose, taking her proffered hand. They walked, shoulder to shoulder, bodies swaying in the unconscious rhythm of full youth, to the upper end of the bar. The water was very shallow here but the girl's voice came softly.

"Carry me, Ota Kte. I do not wish to wet my hair again."

Nothing loath, Kelso picked her up, knowing he had something better than just *any* bag of bones and hank of hair in his arms! She for sure knew it, too. That crossing was so shallow she could have forded it on her hands and knees without wetting a braid tip.

Ashore, he put her gently down on the short pile of the buffalo grass, remained standing over her a moment, suddenly awkward. She smiled up at him.

They rested side by side, the girl's copper-red hair outflung upon the mountain man's buckskinned shoulder. Presently Kelso spoke, his voice soft with the moment's memory.

"I am far from my camp, Bright Hair, and the day is going. I must travel soon."

"Aye," the girl whispered, an unwonted tenseness suddenly in her tones, the bright smile fading with peculiar swiftness. "The moon will be fat tonight. The trail will be good. I am grateful to you, Ota Kte—but you must hurry, now. *While there is yet time*!"

Kelso, his head full of the coming moonrise and the just-past sunset, missed the emphasis. "I'll remember you," he said at last and lamely, knowing that wasn't what he'd had in heart and head to say at all.

"To remember is nothing—" her pause was hurried, her downcast eyes sweeping up his buckskins to hold on the tanned granite of his face—"to forget, though, that is something!"

"I won't forget you, either, girl—" Kelso clamped the words off, not meaning to have let them out.

Cuss it, why couldn't a man just let it go? Just get up and out of there? Maybe a man had best quit horsing himself—had best admit the little Cheyenne squaw had winged him with an arrow he'd never break off.

"*Veho*—" something in the girl's powdery voice blocked the growing trail of his confusion—"when I came to this grove my heart was not as it now is. I had not had your great hands upon me, nor your true love words in my ear—"

The nervous way she said it, trailing it off and all, took the softness of the ground from under Kelso. Swung his narrow-hard eyes toward her.

"What are you trying to say, girl?

I don't like the sound of your voice now. Something is wrong!"

"May Maheo forgive me!" The girl muttered the name of the Cheyenne Almighty fervently. "Moxtaveto never will!"

"What do you mean?" barked Kelso, catching the sudden glance she eye-tailed around the edge of the clearing behind them, having sense enough not to follow her gaze with his own. The hackles of fear were up in him, now, straight as the hairs on an angry dog's back.

"I have lied to you, Ota Kte. As Maheo is my witness I love you now, *Veho*! But it is too late. I have plotted with Axhonehe, my promised one, to trap you here!"

Mad Wolf! This god-beautiful girl and that stinking murderer promised to one another? Working all along to trap him in cold blood?

"I knew it! By God, I knew it!" Kelso heard the hiss of his own harsh English curse, held it down quick enough as the girl's eyes flashed warningly.

"Do not move to arise, Ota Kte!" The desperate whisper came with the smiling lips which reached playfully for his neck. "Continue your caress. It will give you a moment. Axhonehe is already behind us, waiting only for you to arise!"

While complying with the girl's terse order to keep his unhappy embrace in effect, Kelso ducked his head under her arm, grabbed himself a half-wink toward the back edge of the clearing.

Sitting their gaunted ponies hawk-shadow still, interestedly studying the clumsy lovemaking of the white scout, were a baker's dozen Cheyenne Dog Soldiers.

Aii-eee! The buzzards! Their faces were red and rough as rimrock. And the sons were that duded up with war tack their potbellied mounts couldn't have stood up under another ounce of it. Little Josh Kelso had himself a real salt-tailed set of playmates rimming that brush back there!

A man could see the first twelve of the hostiles qualified salty without he scarcely had to look at them. The thirteenth, without he had to look at him at all!

He was a thin, snake-muscled man, dark-colored and heavily pock-marked. A high-bridged nose, squashed over like a broken melon, smeared itself above the liver-lipped vacancy of his enormous mouth. He was clad only in a gray wolfskin shoulder cape, breech-clout and moccasins, the thrusting, corded neck and varmint-fierce head completing the chromo of Dog Soldier loveliness.

He was a wolf, all right. And looking all-fired mad!

Well, there was one way to go. A man could roll out away from the girl, taking up his rifle on the roll and snap-shooting the chief in the belly. That way, at least, he'd be leaving Monaseetah with a proper wedding present, no matter the rest of them got him down the next minute.

Half a second before Kelso allowed to make his roll up, a mud-yellow, thousand-to-one shot wandered out of the near fringe of the encircling timber. Muzzling the tender browse of the riverside grass, Wasiya grazed his carefree way along the bank of the Cimarron.

While the grinning Dog Soldiers

waited, the mountain man didn't. The jumped-open eyes of the hostiles suddenly told them the hated Ota Kte had somehow gotten off the ground and onto his huge pony while they were sitting there on their simple tailbones. The belated rage of their war cries blended with the echo of Kelso's shout at Wasiya, their scrubby ponies churning the dry dirt of the clearing in the eagerness of their start after the fleeing Sioux gelding.

The mountain man didn't trouble himself looking back to glory over his tactical brilliance. Rifle slugs were now whistling close enough around him to give a man pneumonia by the draft they set up. And if that wasn't hot Cheyenne pony breath blowing on his banging backside, it would do till some came along.

In response to Kelso's inspired yelling, Wasiya flattened out, gradually opening up the twilight between the mountain man and the screaming Dog Soldiers.

To be certain sure, young Mr. Kelso was a long spell from home. But the deer-fast yellow gelding had him well on the way. Failing any one of a dozen chances they'd get winged yet by a couple of stray ounces of Indian lead, him and Wasiya had it made.

Turning to throw a final shout of derision at the pursuing Cheyenne, Kelso felt the sudden, jarring wrench in the powerful withers beneath the whipping saddle horn. He heard Wasiya's desperate neigh. Knew one of the gelding's reaching forelegs had found and driven down through the thin crust of a prairie dog hole. Tried, too late, to throw himself clear of the falling horse. Felt the blinding shock of the ground coming into the side of his twisting head. Knew, then, only a long, cool blackness in which there was no further, slightest sound. Nor any least hint of remembered feeling or body motion.

CHAPTER NINE

The Washita

SOMETIME before midnight of the 19th, Mad Wolf's returning war party struck the main Washita thirty miles west of that stream's wide-looping entrance through the jumbled range of the Antelope Hills. A short while later, moving eastward down the widening valley, they struck the first group of lodges.

Kelso, his head still aching from his two-day-old fall at Middle Spring, was on the point of dismissing the lodges as a guard camp for the immense hostile pony herd through which they had ridden the past mile, when he took sudden note of the big black tipi centering the group. He'd seen that set of skins before. And not long before. It was Black Kettle's.

Mad Wolf upended his carbine, levered four shots, the Cheyenne Good Medicine Number, over the ridgepoles of Moxtaveto's lodge, his boastful challenge riding in over the impromptu fusillade.

"Ho, you, Moxtaveto! Come out now. See what Axhonehe has brought you. The war is on, old man, and we have counted the first coup!"

For Mad Wolf, Kelso reckoned the greeting was one of rare good humor, and he waited with considerable interest for Black Kettle's response to it. The response came neither in good humor, nor did it come from Black Kettle. It came, instead, from Ante-

lope Woman, the old headman's elder squaw and one Cheyenne, quite clearly, who feared neither the devil nor his Dog Soldier advocate.

"May Maheo curse you, Axhonehe!" Her dour greeting preceded the emergence of her craggy features through the parting entrance flaps. "Take your stinking soldier dogs and be off! You know as well as you sit grinning there on that runted stallion that Moxtaveto is not in his lodge. He is where you sent him, you skinny whelp of misfortune. Out bringing back the Kiowa and Comanche from where your scouts chased them with those big lies about Yellow Hair coming to kill them. May Maheo spit in your eye when your hour comes to look at him!"

With the curse the Indian woman wrenched the tipi flaps closed. For the first and only time in Kelso's memory, Mad Wolf laughed.

"You see, Etapeta? You see what a brain your chief has, brother?"

"Aye, it worked." Big Body added his thick-lipped grin to his leader's. "I never thought it would. Those scouts you sent ahead to spread the fear were a good idea."

"Ten Bears and Lone Wolf are afraid of war. I want no Indians who are dreaming of peace in this camp when Yellow Hair comes. Just us and the Arapahoe, cousin. *And old Moxtaveto*!"

Kelso whistled silently. This cussed Axhonehe was crazy like a coyote.

"Now, listen in there, old woman!" Mad Wolf's interrupting shout was sent to the silent lodge. "When Moxtaveto comes in you tell him I have captured Ota Kte. You hear that, woman? Old Plenty Kills, himself. Tell Moxtaveto I'm going to burn the white devil for our people. Like I promised in my pledge to the Lodge. You hear?"

There was no answer from the lodge and Mad Wolf, his short string of humor exhausted, wheeled his pony. "She heard me, all right. Let's go. I'm thinking now it may be well to burn this soldier-scout cur *before* the old man gets back."

"Aye! Then the old devil can't stop us!" Big Body's agreement was joyously immediate. "*Hii-yee-hahh*!" The thundering shout was aided and abetted by the simultaneous discharge of the red giant's rifle toward the listening stars. "Let's go, cousin! Let's go burn old Ota Kte!"

The noisy approach of Mad Wolf's returning raiders had the main downstream camp of the hostiles in a midnight uproar minutes after they rode into it. Kelso was unceremoniously dumped into the noisome shelter of the tipi of Stone Calf, Black Kettle's deputy chief. There he was left to ruminate on the vicissitudes of an army scout's life in the far west, the while a booming council fire was lit just outside its parted flaps and the name chiefs of the sprawling camp got down to red-brass tacks.

In ten minutes Kelso had as unpretty a picture of Dog Soldier dirt as the intriguing hand of Mad Wolf could dig up. Translating the grunts and sweeping hand-signs of the consulting Indians a man got the happy impression that the strings of his and the General's futures were shorter than a couple of bitten-off bear tails.

In the first place, with his trusting tribal chief well out of earshot, Stone Calf was wavering toward the cause of the Dog Soldiers—Mad Wolf's suddenly revealed intention to trap and wipe out Custer and the 7th. In the second place Little Raven and Big Mouth, the number-one and -two Arapahoes, were clearly with the Dog Soldier plot, bearing out Mad Wolf's earlier revelation.

In the third and unpleasantly final place, while there remained some little area of disagreement as to the wisdom of trying to ambush the justly feared Yellow Hair, there was none whatsoever on the proposition of burning Ota Kte. *Wagh*! It would be a real affair. A big Sun Dance. Maybe even a Scalp Dance. Who could tell? Anyway, let the red pole be put up in the morning! Let the squaws gather wood all day! *He-hau*! *He-hau*! *He-hau*!

For perhaps the first time in his life the captive mountain man turned his dust-sore eyes starward, staring long and thoughtfully through the open smokehole of Stone Calf's lodge, and presently had a few well chosen words with the white man's Maheo. Nothing like the heat of a hostile council fire and the upcoming stench of singed scout-meat to make a settlement Christian out of a South Park heathen.

Happen the Good Lord didn't right quick call for a hand in the deal, Josh Kelso was cashed in.

The following morning, even while the red-painted, twelve-foot length of the cottonwood burning-pole was being lovingly planted beside the wandering Washita, the mountain man got a last-minute reprieve. It came in the angry person of old Black Kettle jogging his lathered pony into the midst of the preparing festivities shortly after sunrise.

The unexpected appearance of the aging chief created a furor well calculated to test the metal of any savage commander.

The quiet-faced Cheyenne had no base iron in the veining of his character. He was old and the once total grip on the loyalties of his guileless followers was slipping with every mile Custer's column put beneath the advancing feet of the 7th's horses. But he was still the headchief of all the Southern Cheyenne.

He now put the cold steel of that prestige squarely up to the enraged Mad Wolf.

The Dog Soldier demonstrated his own dangerous metal by cannily refusing the showdown. It was too soon. Everything was coming his way as it was. With a flowery covering speech about his sacred vow to kill Kelso and about his thoughtlessness in not awaiting Moxtaveto's blessing on it, he backed beautifully down.

Kelso no sooner wondered at this about-face than the reason for it came riding up the Washita from the direction of the recently deserted Kiowa and Comanche lodges. The moment the watching scout recognized old Ten Bears and the furtive-eyed Lone Wolf, he had his answer. The Kiowa and Comanche warrior strength was back in camp and with it the precarious balance of power had teetered back to the old Cheyenne.

Even so, with Indians, where a face has been lost, part of it at least must be restored. Mad Wolf pressed his remaining advantage to wring from a clearly unwilling Black Kettle his blessings on the immediate mating of his beautiful foster daughter and the plotting Dog Soldier.

But Black Kettle wasn't through. With impassioned urgency, he played his red trump.

"Listen, my people!" The old magic of their patriarch's voice quieted the muttering ranks of the hostiles. "I have returned with hopeful news. Ten Bears says that at Fort Cobb there is a new peace mission. He says that Colonel Hazen, the soldier chief there, has orders to give sanctuary to all peaceful Indians, and has much money to buy us food."

The silver-haired oldster paused, weathered hand sweeping eloquent accent to his plea.

"Do not take the war trail, my people. Wait for me to return. I go now to treat with the soldier chief at Fort Cobb. He will let us come in. We will go there and be safe. Only those whose hearts are big for war will stay and seek out Yellow Hair.

"I will return and you will know whose tongue is straight. I ask you to wait for me."

Black Kettle's speech had a marked effect on the main body of the encamped hostiles, the whole camp falling back into an uneasy quiet to await his return from Fort Cobb.

Vahe! Let there be peace. Let Moxtaveto return from the fort and lead them into its protection. Hazen Chief had a good heart, all the Indians knew that. The words of the old chief were always best in the end. Wait for Moxtaveto. *Nohetto*! Let there be no more talk of war!

All through the endless hours of the 21st, 22nd, and 23rd, Kelso paced the dark confines of Black Kettle's lodge awaiting the return of the chief's mission to Hazen.

He was no longer bound hand and foot, at least not by rawhide and horse-hair. But Mad Wolf wasn't whelped yesterday. Nor the day before. He had Big Body and a guard-changing shift of Dog Soldiers strung that tight around old Black Kettle's lodge a grayback louse couldn't have crawled twenty yards from that tipi without he was stepped on and squashed by a patrolling Dog Soldier's footskin.

With plenty of time to think, the mountain man still couldn't untangle the hopeful surprise of the Hazen peace mission. He had been as set back as any of the Cheyenne to hear of the unprecedented "sanctuary order." Not that it didn't make good sense. It did. In fact, so good a man could scarce believe it. Not, leastways, a man who knew the way the army operated and who with his own eyes had read Sheridan's orders to Custer not ten days gone—orders to attack and destroy the Indians' winter camp on the Washita.

True, Hazen's district was a separate command from Sheridan's, but somehow a man couldn't bring himself to think that even the army could be that balled up on its own orders. Something smelled wrong about the

whole setup — big, bad-medicine wrong.

With dusk of the 23rd the mountain man, squatting outside the lodge with Black Kettle's trusted friend, Magpie, for his evening's airing, heard the Wolf call of the Cheyenne tribal signal echoing in over the darkened prairie from the east. Minutes later Black Kettle rode into the feeble reach of Magpie's supper fire, flanked by the subchiefs assigned by the various tribes to accompany him; Stone Calf for the militant Cheyenne, Ten Bears for the Comanche, Lone Wolf for the Kiowa, and Big Mouth for the hostile Arapahoe.

But the composition of Moxtaveto's returning retinue was instantly lost on Kelso as his eyes alighted on the slender figure at the old chief's side.

He had not seen Monaseetah since Middle Spring grove. But anger, treachery, hate, and heartpain combined had not been able to keep the picture of her face from his mind. She had ridden with him every weary step of the way from that love-trap on the Cimarron and now here she was again, more hauntingly real and unbelievably beautiful than ever.

His narrowed eyes, however, sought the return of hers in vain. The Indian girl sat her calico mare staring blankly over his head, her gaze as straight and stony as any in the dark-faced company around her. Turning his eyes bitterly from the girl to the faces of the peace mission, the mountain man clamped his jaw.

If a man could read a face, he could read a red one as quick as a white. And on any face in that hard-eyed group, from the Negro-dark visage of Little Raven to the pale pockmarks of Stone Calf's slash-mouthed scowl, one word and one alone, was written. *Disaster.*

Seconds later the silent group, accompanied by the expressionless Monaseetah, had turned their ponies past Black Kettle's tipi to file into the darkness toward the main Cheyenne camp, and Kelso, seated with Moxtaveto in the flap-closed interior of the old chief's lodge, was listening to the barren terms of that disaster.

CHAPTER TEN

The Burning Pole

GNARLED hands moving swiftly, voice held low, Black Kettle tolled off the deathknell of his people.

" 'I am sent here as a peace chief,' " he began. "These are Hazen Chief's very words I am giving you, my son. 'All here is to be peace, but north of the Arkansas is General Sheridan, the great war chief, and I do not control him. and he has all the soldiers who are fighting the Cheyennes and Arapahoes. Therefore you must go back to your country, and if the soldiers come to fight, you must remember they are not from me, but from that great war chief, and it is with him you must make your peace . . . I cannot stop the war but will send your talk to the Great Father, and if he gives me orders to treat you like the friendly Indians I will send out to you to come in; but you must not come in unless I send for you, and

you must keep well out beyond the friendly Kiowas and Comanches. . . . I hope you understand how and why it is that I cannot make peace with you. . . "

"Was that all, father? There were no other words? You could not have forgotten something?" Kelso put the question quietly as the old chief's voice trailed off.

Black Kettle shook his head, paused as his weathered hand struck the flint to the blackened bowl of the stone pipe.

"It is the last smoke of Moxtaveto as headchief of his people," he said slowly, the glow of the burning tobacco bronzing the seamed features. "Ten Bears has told me he must obey Hazen Chief and take his people to Fort Cobb. Lone Wolf will follow him. Even now the lodges will be coming down. The Kiowa and Comanche will depart, and Axhonehe will have his way. Moxtaveto will wait for Yellow Hair alone."

Kelso watched the smoke drift upward, let his words come softly. "We are dead, father, you and I. I say goodby now and I touch the brow for the last time. My heart is good for you. Always remember that."

He was on his feet, then, the softness gone from the harsh bark of the Cheyenne syllables, his long arm reaching for the chief's beautifully engraved Henry rifle. "Give me the gun, old man! It is better to die now than sit here waiting for Axhonehe. *Zeo notaseas*! I am going from this place!"

Black Kettle seized the gun, sweeping it away. "No, my son. You must trust me. Moxtaveto is dead, but Ota Kte will live! I have arranged it—"

"Give me that gun, father." The scout's voice turned ugly. "You cannot arrange anything. Your power is gone. Axhonehe will be down on this lodge within the next breath."

"Aye," The old chief's smile was strangely happy. "My power is gone. Axhonehe will be here even as you say. But in here, my son—" the venerable Cheyenne tapped his head significantly—"I am still chief over that Dog Soldier cur. You will see!"

"You're wrong, father." With the words Kelso moved, wrenching the weapon away from him, covering him with the snake-fast swing of its muzzle. "I'm not waiting to see. *You* will see!"

The sudden snarling of the tribal drums, barking the news of the returning peace mission's arrival in the main camp downstream, rolled up the Washita to break the eye-locked silence. Black Kettle shrugged eloquently.

"The choice is yours, my son. I am waiting."

Kelso was waiting, too, now, his wavering mind spurred by the building tide of sound racing up the Washita. Black Kettle's power was broken by the failure of his mission to Fort Cobb, and Axhonehe was coming to redeem his pledge to the Dog Soldier Lodge. The compelling vision of the bright-red burning-pole flashed nakedly through the moment of Kelso's indecision.

"All right, father. I'm listening!"

"Listen well, my son. Axhonehe is upon us."

The white scout had no real need of the admonition. The muttered rush of the old chief's following words, with their hurried revelation of last minute hope, scarcely had time to reach him before their last syllables were ridden under by the turf-showering halt of Mad Wolf's warriors outside the tipi flap.

Black Kettle was rising, then, the muzzle of his returned rifle burying itself in the small of Kelso's back. "Out the flap, Ota Kte. Quickly now before he has a chance to call out for you!"

"I am your prisoner, father." The bone-dry grimace managed a trace of the old grin. "Deliver me to your enemies like the weakhearted traitor you are. *And may Maheo forever bless you*!"

Lying in the familiar blackness of Stone Calf's tipi, Kelso reflected at uneasy leisure on the tallow-smooth working of the first part of Black Kettle's "arrangement." Acting the loyal, white-hating Cheyenne to the last proud feather in his seven-foot ceremonial bonnet, the old chief had emerged from his lodge to turn the captive scout over to the Dog Soldiers at the end of a patently sincere rifle barrel. Outmaneuvered, Mad Wolf had grudgingly accepted the prisoner, returned him to the main hostile camp, ordered immediate preparation for the delayed burning of Ota Kte.

As the savage clamor of that preparation went forward on the broad dance ground fronting Stone Calf's tipi, Kelso turned his mind to the second part of Moxtaveto's promise. The thought merely added to the sweat stream already coursing his broad back.

It was all well and good for the old chief to have told him, even though he'd refused to reveal his identity, that he still had one loyal friend among his fellow tribesmen. And that that friend would manage Ota Kte's escape sometime before the midnight-scheduled burning hour.

The cussed part was that a man didn't have to guess much as to who that mysterious "one loyal friend" was. And having guessed it, he had to admit that old Magpie, staunch friend or no, was a pretty rickety war horse upon which to throw much of a saddle of hope. Not that the old rascal might not try. But suspicious of him as the Dog Soldiers would naturally be, Black Kettle's best friend had about as much chance of getting close to Stone Calf's tipi as a coyote to a mother-guarded buffalo calf.

The scout's nerve-tuned reflexes jumped spasmodically to the puncture of the knife blade lancing the rear skins of the lodge. Fascinated, he watched the slim blade slice through the taut cowskins. The next minute he was stifling his gasp of recognition.

That small head and slender arm following the knife through that opened tipi wall was a long way from senile or shaky!

Monaseetah came to him, shadow-swift, the soft crush of her lips on his warning back any questions. The knife blade flashed faster than a man could follow it. Kelso was free and following the Indian girl back out the slitted skins seconds later.

A three-minute breath-held sneak through the willows backing Stone Calf's lodge brought them to the banks of the Washita. At the river there was no pause, Monaseetah slipping into the darkened flood to let the current carry her down and away from the flaring reflections of the dance fires, Kelso cutting the black waters behind her.

A quarter mile downstream of the camp they came out of the water on a long stratum of slabrock leading to a heavy growth of cottonwood saplings. Kelso recognized the silhouette of the tethered gelding even as the girl was guiding him into the grove, and her first words were coming to him.

"It is your *Wasiya,* your Winter Giant, my love. Take him and ride. Do not stop to talk. Good-by, Ota Kte. My heart rides with you—"

Her halting words were broken off by the hard smash of the mountain man's kiss. "God bless you, girl. You know where my heart rides!"

"Aye, Ota Kte, always." She clung to him a moment. When she broke away her voice had gone harsh. "Go now, *Veho*! There is no choice."

Like it or not, a man had to buy it. He had his chance to get back to Custer now and he couldn't refuse it. He had to go, and go fast. The last slim chance for all of them was his getting to the General and stopping him short of Mad Wolf's trap on the Washita.

"I'll be back, girl," was all he said before swinging aboard the restless gelding. "*Zeo notaseas.*"

"*Nataemhon,*" she echoed softly. "I'll be waiting, Ota Kte—"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Winter Giant

ACROSS the stream the prairie lay open and low, the soft turf of its bottomlands setting a perfect track-trap for the man that would be tomfool enough to ride a twelve-hundred-pound gelding across them. With that cussed Blind Coyote and his guiding hand, Yellow Buffalo, up front of the Dog Soldier pursuit, a man couldn't be too cautious where he left his barefoot pony prints.

But he couldn't be too choosy at that. Wasiya was one horse in a hundred hostile pony herds, but the old devil had been ridden down to his hocks in that crazy Dog Soldier march from Middle Spring, and four days on winter-poor grass hadn't put the spring back in his shaggy pasterns.

Shortly the scout brought the gelding up, slid off of him, cocked a primely interested ear back toward the hostile camp. Ten seconds of listening brought him nothing but the swirl of the Washita and the dying rustle of the night breeze in the leaves of the riverbank cottonwoods.

Wagh! All was well in Mad Wolf's firelit front yard. The red sons hadn't spotted his getaway and by now the girl would be safe back in Moxtaveto's lodge—

The next instant Kelso was piling aboard the startled Wasiya and kicking him headlong through the shallows of the Washita, his grin long gone.

Aii-eee, brother! A deaf-mute with

both ears plugged and buggy blinders on couldn't have missed that sudden commotion. There was unhappy Dog Soldier yapping enough going on in that camp back yonder to raise new hair on a scalped Sioux's head. The boys had come to Stone Calf's lodge to pick up their trussed white bird!

Across the Washita lay the open prairie and a ninety-mile night ride to swing north and west to intercept Custer on his line of march from Camp Supply. It was 1.00 a.m. of the 25th and the General had been scheduled to leave that camp on the 24th.

The mountain man hesitated, the trail-taking wolf-howls of the Dog Soldiers nudging his decision. A son in *his* skins went one of two ways: north-west to Custer, or southeast to Colonel Hazen and the safety of his peace sanctuary at Fort Cobb. One way he saved his own scalp for sure. The other way he saved the General's, *maybe*.

The recollection of Monaseetah smiling up at him in the hurried dark of the downstream cottonwood grove —the refeeling of the quick burn of her hungry mouth on his—the tear-wet caress of her lashes—the quiet promise of her parting whisper, "I will wait for you, Ota Kte," brought the final curse to Kelso's Indian-wide lips.

The country ahead of him for half a day's ride in any direction was flatter than an old squaw's chest. With daylight, a mounted man would stand out on the level of that shortgrass as black as a huge old bull in the middle of a forty-foot buffalo wallow. And with Dog Soldier patrols due to be crawling the country between him and Custer thick as sowbugs under a turned-over cowcake, a man wouldn't have a prayer. He'd be spotted before the sun was two hours high and scalped before it was three.

The flint of the scout's grin struck briefly. Such as the Arkansas Option was, a man would have to take it. Short end and all. And mortal fast. Happen he *really* aimed to get to Custer he'd never make it riding the red fringe of Mad Wolf's north-flung gauntlet.

Once more Wasiya spun to the head-jerking demand of the halter rope. Spun and jumped obediently to the hammer of the sweat-stained moccasins. Spun and pointed the Roman ugliness of his sooty nose as due northwest as the sink of a winter sun.

An hour before dawn the southwesterly breeze faltered and died. Wasiya, swinging his muzzle nervously, searched the dead air and whickered softly. Kelso stirred in the saddle, adding his own uneasy grunt to the gelding's complaint.

When ten straight days of unfailing southwest desert wind quit blowing a man could begin to worry. She never quit unless she was fixing to switch, and a man could sweat a little until she decided to let him know which way she meant to switch.

For the next hour and until the leaden daylight came filtering eastward across the empty reaches of the plain, Kelso sweated. Twenty minutes after the first, sick light of the 25th began to grow, his perspiration was

shut sharp off. The unnatural hush and humidity of the past hour began to move, slowly at first and not direct enough for a man to mark it. Then Kelso, watching the unfailing barometer of the buffalo grass, saw the two-inch nap of the prairie carpet wave and rustle away into the southwest.

With the flattening of the grass the temperature began to drop. In a matter of half a mile Kelso's shirt, dampwet since leaving the Washita, was frozen to his broad back. Another mile and the caked trail lather lacing Wasiya's steaming flanks was crusted over by a quarter-inch rime of hoarfrost. And still the wind was no more than rustle in the buffalo grass.

But it was that kind of a "mouse rustle" that put a high plainsman's instincts straight on edge.

There weren't many things Josh Kelso figured to be afraid of. That creepy ghost rustle through the panhandle shortgrass was one of them. When the grama started to stir where there was no wind; when it whispered and lisped at a man like a million tiny mousefeet were moving invisibly through it; when it lay all flat in one direction and that direction was due southwest—then it was full time for a man to pucker his belly and admit he was scared stiff.

Again Wasiya whickered, the swing of his nostrils now steadied directly away from the south-pointing press of the grass. Kelso, his uneasy gaze following the gelding's, cursed silently.

Well, there it was, mister. Him and the gelding had had it. Mad Wolf, Custer, Monaseetah—they were all of them out of it, now. It was Josh Kelso and his horse against *Waniyetula*, the Blizzard God of the North Plains Sioux. All bets were off and the Dog Soldiers were a deader issue than last year's Agency beef.

That greasy cloudbank crouching northeast up there past the Canadian wasn't any summer shower. The way it was mushrooming down across the prairie, the minor-key hum of its power building in the dead air all around him, the raw snowstink of its winter-rotten breath, all let a man know straight where he was riding.

And where he was riding was dead into the hollow gut of a Texas Blue Norther.

The smash of the snow roared and crashed against the staggering gelding, clogging his rolling eyes, clotting his close-pinned ears. Atop the failing pony Kelso fought the snow away from his own mouth and nose, gagging and cursing at the breath-killing strangle of it. His arms were like useless clubs now and in the frozen clamp of his long legs around the gelding's rib-cage there was no longer any feeling above the knee. In the half shelter of an eight-foot cut-bank he halted the gelding and forced his numbing mind to the last decision.

It was the last hour he and the big horse had ahead of them, and Kelso was done. Snowblind, half-frozen, almost powerless to move, he had made his human effort. It was up to the horse now.

Up to twelve hundred pounds of steel-tough Sioux buckskin. Up to a mud-yellow bundle of bad nerves and bellows-sized lungs. Up to a North Plains colt who in the seven years since he'd quit sucking his Indian

dam's lean udders had never been ridden to the baserock of his bottom. Up to a rat-tailed, burr-maned pony whose last ride would tell a man how well his Sioux breeders had named him. *Wasiya*, the Winter Giant—it was up to him.

Kelso leaned clumsily forward, the effort cracking the ice gluing his buttocks to the saddle, breaking the sleet-glaze covering the blue of his barely moving lips.

"It's your head, little hoss. Fight it off—"

Wasiya rolled the whites of his wicked eyes. Swung the keg-headed ugliness of his thick muzzle toward the mutter of the cracked voice. Shook himself like a great yellow cat as the grunting assurance of his soft whicker went to the no longer listening mountain man.

Moving out from the shelter of the cut-bank, the big gelding swung sharply to his right. As he went, he heeded no shift of the hammering wind. Heard no siren voice of the Blizzard God's angrily beckoning howls. The yellow gelding was neither snowblind nor stormdeaf, and his long forgotten Sioux herdsman had named him well.

Wasiya, King of the Big North Snows. *Wasiya*, the Real Winter Giant. . . .

CHAPTER TWELVE

Custer's Compass

THE face above him seemed floating in the empty air, now drawing closer until it almost touched him, now receding swiftly until it was lost in a distance as far and hazy as some outer star. Still, he knew it.

The bleached droop of the haystack mustaches, the petulant set of the small mouth, the compelling glare of the coyote-wild eyes. Star-dim or suddenly moonbright, there was no mistaking that face. It was Yellow Hair's!

Minutes later Kelso was sitting up in the warm bundle of the army blankets, gulping the steaming coffee and forcing the story of his capture and escape through the still unwilling stiffness of his frost-black lips. When he had concluded, Custer merely nodded.

"You're lucky to be alive, Joshua. That muckledun percheron of yours brought you in, the good Lord knows how. Found the river, apparently, and followed it up to strike our camp here on the Canadian."

"Listen, General—" Kelso's plea ignored the miracle of Wasiya's victory over Waniyetula—"you're almost atop that hostile camp. I got to give you the layout. I kin draw you out a map of it that won't miss three lodges of bein' dead accurate. Mad Wolf and them Arapahoe have got a bad trap set for you, if you go in like you're figurin'. Leave me show you how it lays down yonder and I reckon you won't even want to go in. It's only them lousy Dog Soldiers and Little Raven's Arapahoe that wants to fight, I swear. Listen, General—"

"You listen, sir! Dr. Coates says you're not to talk now. He's had you packed in snow for three hours and you can thank him you still have arms and legs. I think we owe him the courtesy to do as he asks. Do you hear me, sir?"

"Cuss it, General! Countin' the full

strength of the Dog Soldier Lodge at close to a thousand, you got better than three thousand hostile bucks squattin' down there in that Big Bend of the Washita, waitin' for you to poke your nose past it!"

"Easy now, Joshua." The small white hand was pushing him back in the blankets. "Take Coates's pill here and let that be an end to it for tonight. Let's call that an order, sir—" here the irresistible broadening of the peg-toothed grin—"you've got to rest if you're going on with us in the morning!"

"What's in the pill, General?" The scout lay back with the assurance he wasn't going to be left in the base camp on the Canadian, his query coming almost idly. "Wolf-bait arsenic?"

"Opium, Joshua. You're done in, man. You'll have to sleep whether you like it or not, sir!"

Kelso nodded, offering no further resistance to either Custer's orders or Coates's laudanum tablets. He was suddenly tired and tomorrow would be another day. Plenty of time, yet, to make his map of the hostile layout for the General, and to sweet-talk him into following it, even if he couldn't get him to hold up the column altogether. They were still a long day's march from the Washita and the cussed warm feel of the blankets and the woodstove was more than a played-out mountain jasper could argue with.

He lay on back, letting the leaden ease of the drug push him down and keep him there. Custer's face pulled away, got fuzzy, floated around the tent a spell, then drifted peacefully out the flap.

Beyond the thin canvas walls, old Waniyetula, the Sioux Blizzard God, still yammered and carried on. A man could hear him even above the cussed opium. But in the big Sibley it was close and warm, and the waiting Washita was a good many safe miles away. . . .

Who was there to blame the dozing scout if he failed to hear the sudden change in Waniyetula's cheated howl? The change that turned the old devil's angry voice from frustrated screaming to sudden, mock-hollow laughing?

Kelso came awake, frowning up at the unfamiliar gray of the tent ceiling, the lethargy of the opium still slowing his mind. Presently it occurred to him that the storm had let up and it was almighty quiet outside. Way too quiet for a field camp of 850 cavalrymen. He was at the tent flaps then, big hand ripping them wide.

Outside the air was still, only a powderflake fall of snow still sifting down. Nothing like enough to mar a man's eyesweep of the Canadian Crossing camp site. Not in broad daylight, by damn!

There it was. The long, silent emptiness of the snow-trampled picket lines. The mute rows of parked supply wagons and field ambulances. The lonely scatter of the deserted Sibleys. The stark, iron-shod staring of the cavalry-horse prints leading away across the ice-clogged Canadian. The lonely handful of shivering troopers tending the remaining pickets of wagon mules and spare troop horses.

Add it all up any way you wanted. It came out the same. There wasn't a

7th saddle blanket in sight. Custer was gone. And he'd left Josh Kelso behind!

The mountain man wheeled like an arrow-shot bear. Damn the dirty little scut! A man could forgive a lot of things about the General, and forget a lot more. But not this. This he would remember. Just as long as he'd remember that peg-toothed grin and friendly shoulder-push. And then, after that, a hell of a lot longer!

Even as his curses fell, Kelso was toeing into the stove-dried stiffness of his moccasins, reaching for the tent-propped barrel of his Henry rifle. Slipping out the Sibley's flap, he moved behind the cover of a line of parked ambulances, toward the spare-mount picket line.

There, after quickly noting old Wasiya was still on his feet and warm-blanketed against the weather, he made his choice. He took a short-backed gray mare, a half-Arab buffalo pony he recognized as the favorite mount of the Assistant Surgeon, Major Coates. Saddling her had to be done quick and quiet, but it was no trick for a South Park horse thief.

Five minutes after leaving the tent, Kelso was putting the mare across the Canadian, the shouts of the base camp's surprised troopers blending with the slash of the Henry barrel across the Arab pony's startled haunch. Before the running soldiers reached the river's edge, she was only a black dot against the snow-held south-pointing hoofprints of Custer's 7th.

For the first six hours the snow held off, the wind uneasily down. The clouds were still low, sometimes laying flat to the ground so that a man had to feel his way for a mile at a time. But generally there was light enough to see, and Custer's column was leaving a heavy track. Where a man couldn't see it he could smell it, working slow and following the sharp odor of horse droppings.

Before long the trailing scout had closed the gap to where a Sioux-trained hand, held close and steady, could detect the radiating core warmth of the freezing apples. Within half an hour more he didn't even have to squat to put a hand to them, the thin wisps of the bowel-heat smoke telling a man they were only minutes old.

But another mile along the freshening trail and the wind was moving in. A quarter mile farther and the snow was driving dead-level with the flat of the plain. Shortly, the rounding snow dimples of the 7th's hoofprints filled and disappeared. Custer and his 850 mounts and men could have been four hundred yards away and still no nearer than the far side of the Rocky Mountain moon.

Kelso felt the sink in his belly. Fought down the fury that rose in him. Damn the luck! To have gotten fresh-apple close to them and then miss them by five minutes of up-sudden snowhowl!

As the mountain man cursed the gray mare slowed up and "turned whiffy." Instantly, Kelso reined her in, sat watching the work of her muzzle against the drive of the wind.

When a horse that's cavalry-bred and barracks-reared turns all at once whiffy on a man, it wasn't that she was

smelling Indian ponies. This mare was winding friendly, and she wasn't blowing any smell but 7th Cavalry horse-sweat out of her flared-open nostrils!

Kelso gave her her head, along with an encouraging kick in the ribs. Minutes later she had blundered him squarely into the storm-turned rumps of Custer's picket line.

The Colonel had halted his command in a snow-filled wash. Such as this shelter was, compounded by that of the seven ammunition wagons and the one field ambulance brought along, the men of the Camp Supply column were making the miserable best of. The one tent, a big Command Sibley, was pitched to the lea of the ambulance and toward it Kelso guided the Arab mare.

At the tent he pulled her up, grimacing his satisfaction. From the cut and color of the ponies hunching their backs in front of the General's Sibley, a man could rightly guess that a full-out council of war was in progress within. And that the star witnesses and chief hell-getters thereof were California Joe and the rest of Custer's string of hired scouts.

Stepping off the mare, he paused outside the flap to confirm his hunch, his grin growing apace.

"Well, gentlemen—" Custer's thin voice was acid—"I suggest that you've gotten me thoroughly lost. We have left the trail entirely and had it not been for my own use of the compass we wouldn't even know as much as we do. Which is simply that we're eight hours south of the Canadian. Any question on that, gentlemen?"

"None atall, General." California Joe wagged his huge beard soberly. "We're jest as lost as Bo Peep's sheep. And I allow we're goin' to stay thataway. There's only one man rightly knows where Black Kettle's village is, and that could take us direct to it. And you done left him back yonder on the Canadian."

Kelso was reaching for the tent flaps, then, but Custer's reply held him up. For a long spell he was glad it had, too. A man was forever selling the little General short, only to have him up and buy his way back into your heart just like he was doing now.

"Gentlemen—" it was a rare mood of self admission—"that was a mistake. Joshua was a sick man and I asked Dr. Coates to drug him so he would not be further upset by our departure. I wish now, as fervently as any of you, that we had him here. But wishing is not going to bring Joshua Kelso through those tent flaps!"

"Oh, I dunno, General—" the opportunity was too great for the grinning mountain man to resist—"depends on how hard you wish—"

Kelso's quiet words, ushering his gaunt height through the opening flap, broke the meeting as wide open as the appearance of any Moses, mountain or Biblical, could have done. In a matter of seconds the backslaps of his fellow scouts and the unabashed handshakes of Custer's relieved staff were completed.

The little commander at once ordered the tent cleared save for himself and his prodigal scout-corps favorite. At the order, Kelso's grin dried just an understanding trace.

Jealous as always where he smelled the chance for a major decision and

conclusive military move, the little General was not about to share with his staff any distinction which might result from the mountain man's disclosures. What the big scout might have to tell him about their present location in relation to Black Kettle's camp, along with any success which might obtain from the following of that information, was going to belong to Lt. Col. G. A. Custer, Commanding.

And any history-book title or credit for getting the Camp Supply column unlost and heroically led out of the blind gut of that November 26th snow-storm wasn't going to get split up with California Joe, Josh Kelso, or anybody else.

It was going to stay with George Custer and his precious pocket compass!

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Lonely Hill

THE march of blundering events put in dangerous motion by Sheridan's notorious General Order of the 15th now gathered the final speed of inevitability.

It had been 5.00 p.m. by Custer's big gold watch, that hallowed instrument which shared the vestry of his breast pocket with the sacred compass, when the little General had ordered his staff to leave following Kelso's dramatic arrival. For the next hour the silhouette of the column commander's thin figure moved restlessly across the lamplit walls of the big Sibley. In a far corner of the tent, the shadow of the mountain man crouched over the Colonel's war chest, the only movement in it the scratchy laboring of the turkey-quill pen.

While the crude map of the Washita grew under the scout's awkward hand and glass-sharp memory, Custer fired an endless round of terse questions concerning the last-minute strength and disposition of the hostile forces. To these brief queries Kelso's grunted asides provided even shorter answers.

Presently the mountain man's shadow grew tall on the tent walls. The map, the questioning, the answering were done. Providing the snow eased off, they could move with the first light tomorrow. Six hours would see them on the Washita. It was up to Custer now.

Seizing the map from the slow reach of Kelso's hand, Custer studied it for perhaps thirty seconds. At the end of the time he laughed and handed it back. Kelso could see that bad light he knew so well beginning to grow in the little General's eyes.

"Keep it, Joshua. Show it to your children. With General Custer's compliments. I've got it now."

Kelso took the map, knowing Custer's high-voiced excitement was no idle boast. Given half the time he'd used on the scout's rough scrawl, he could six months later draw it for you from memory, not missing a flyspeck nor an inkblot, and drawing it a sight better than you had in the first place.

"I'll get Benteen and the others in now—" the small officer's tones showed no lowering of his Indian fever—"and run over the approach with them. You get over to the com-

missary, man, and put something in that long belly of yours. I won't need you right away and, Joshua—" there was that old shoulder-squeeze again —"when you're done, see that you come back here. I won't have you out in that weather. You're sharing the General's tent tonight, you understand, sir?"

Kelso nodded, understanding several things. Primarily the business of handing him back the map. No use showing the staff something somebody else had done. Not when Yellow Hair could give it to them cleaner and quicker in his own way, and at the same time make it sound like his own personal opinion and private idea.

Moving for the entrance, the mountain man found the little officer there before him, parting the flaps to put in his impatient call for Benteen. The half-frozen trooper outside never got the order, Custer's eyes widening as the flap opening revealed the night sky. Eyes glittering, he wheeled on the big scout.

"By Heaven, Joshua, we've got them now! Look at that sky, man!"

Kelso was over his shoulder then, his belly pulling in as his dark eyes narrowed. As far as a man could see, he was looking at nothing but clear air and clean black starlight. There wasn't a wind whisper or a snowflake stirring south of the Canadian or north of the Washita. And within two hours there would be moon enough to read a hand-written letter by.

"Don't you do it, General—" Kelso was reading the book of Custer's mind a page ahead—"your boys already got eight hours of bad trail behind them. They ain't had no hot food. The hosses is wore down fightin' ground snow. By God, General, you can't do it!"

"Orderly!"

"General, for God's sake, listen!"

"Orderly, get Captain Benteen up here. Major Elliott. Colonel Meyers. Thompson, the rest of them. Instantly, sir, you hear?"

"Yes sir, Colonel. Corporal of the Guard, ho! On the double!"

"General—"

"By thunder, will you be still, Joshua? You've done your work, man. Now be good enough to get out and let me do mine. Out, sir! Do you understand?"

"I understand, General," was all the mountain man said before stepping through the flaps to stand bitter-eyed and silent, watching the race of Custer's orders break the huddling camp from its snowbound bivouac.

Within minutes the troops would be on the last southward move. Within miles Josh Kelso and the coming moonlight would be guiding them along a trail no mountain man could miss. And within six frost-clear hours that trail would have them topping out on the naked crest of the last ridge overlooking Moxtaveto's tipis.

The Camp Supply column stood committed. The Washita was waiting, and Yellow Hair was coming.

The light within the lodge came only from the pipe bowl's smolder, the alternate rise and fall of its glow highlighting the old chief's impassive face. Across from him the girl crouch-

ed in thought-held silence. Outside, the hammer of the wind, quiet for the first time in three days, let the cowskins hang slack and still along the gaunt ribs of the lodgepoles.

There was good cause for the silence and the thought-holding. Two days gone, the last Dog Soldier patrol, returning from its pursuit of Plenty Kills, had reported hearing rifle fire along the Canadian. Had thought, until they reached camp to find they were the last party in, that it had been one of their own groups shooting buffalo.

Last night, Red Bird, a loyal Cheyenne, had come back from a scout to report seeing through the snow a long, dark line of marching figures south of the Canadian. The light was bad, too much snow. They had looked like buffalo at first, but their line was very even. They could have been soldiers.

This morning two of Lone Wolf's Kiowa, moving east with a band of stolen Ute horses, had passed through the camp with a tale of having crossed the snowtrail of many ponies wearing iron shoes. And, yes, the trail was lying to the south, almost where Red Bird had seen the buffalo.

Black Kettle stirred, palmed the cold ash from the long pipe, nodded to the waiting girl.

"Bring the ponies now. Tie them outside. I am uneasy. My heart is bad within me."

"Magpie has been on watch since sundown." Monaseetah's words came with her understanding nod. "It is time he was relieved, Uncle. Who shall I send?"

"Double Wolf. He can be trusted. Send him."

The lithe figure of the girl moved through the flaps, leaving the darkened lodge to the last thoughts and long-cold pipe bowl of Moxtaveto, the tired Black Kettle of the Southern Cheyenne. . . .

Downriver, in the main camp, the dry cottonwood logs were piled higher on the dancefires. *Aii-eee*, cousin! This was turning into a *real* dance. From the northeast, within the hour, two big parties of new Dog Soldier raiders had arrived. Both from Kansas where they had been at work even while that senile Moxtaveto had been whining and pleading with the soldier chief at Fort Cobb. Both parties big for war. Both led by real chiefs. Black Shield, cousin. And Crow Neck. *Wagh*, real chiefs indeed! And they had scalps, fresh ones, twenty-three of them. Now they *would* have a scalp dance.

The drums thundered the news, the cracked voices of the old criers running the village streets of all four tribes, summoning a fresh wave of dancers from the far-flung scatter of the hostile lodges. A scalp dance, brother! Come running now! And bring your squaw or sweetheart. This is the time you dance with her.

And so it was. In the strict social order of the Plains Indians, the scalp dance was the sole ceremonial in which the braves and their women were allowed to touch their bodies. It was a rare occasion, cousin, and guaranteed to be a wild one.

Every warrior old enough to straddle a pony smeared his broad-boned face with the black charcoal paste of

victory, seized his chosen one, and bound her tightly to him in the folds of a single blanket. A wheeling circle was formed, the paired-off dancers facing inward and shuffling from right to left to the quickening throb of the war drums.

The squaws, their squat features blazoned with ocher and vermilion, their skinning knives belted on the outside of their doeskins, bore proudly aloft, on freshly peeled willow staves, the matted trophies of the chase—twenty-three scarcely blood-dried settler scalps.

Hour after hour the driving chant of the drums went on, the glaring rise of the Washita moon serving only to heighten the frenzy of the naked bodies beneath the tight-bound blankets. Ten o'clock came and was pounded under by the drums. Another hour passed. Another began. . . .

On the last, lonely hill west of Moxtaveto's lodge, Double Wolf pulled his buffalo robe closer. Curse this midnight chill. What was the use of it? Down below, the dance was going well. To the west, all was still. It was a good, clear night and the moon let a warrior see a long way.

Wagh! Everything was quiet. No use huddling here and freezing. His lodge was but a few steps down the hill. There were the warm embers of a fire in there, too, and maybe even a little of that boiled dog left in the cooking pot. Moxtaveto was an old woman and it was getting colder by the minute on that cursed hilltop. *Nahooxz*, it was time to go home.

Seconds later, only the moonlight guarded the glistening snow of Black Kettle's watchtower.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"Garry Owen."

KELSO kept the gray mare close in hand. Beside him, Hard Rope, Custer's chief of Osage scouts, held down the gait of his scrawny paint, his slant eyes narrowing as the white scout pointed the sudden loom of the hill ahead. A hundred yards behind them moved Custer and the rest of the scouts, while behind the General another hundred yards came the close-packed troops of the 7th. The snow-squeak and harness jingle of the long column carried clearly in the dead-still air.

Kelso reined the mare in, flung up his long arm. Catching the signal, Custer waved it back to the following troops. The 7th came to a halt, the steam clouds from the sweated flanks of its mounts rising silently upward. Another wave from the mountain man, and Custer was dismounting his scouts, moving forward on foot over the crunching snow.

Kelso kept his voice down, his words short. Over the hill lay the lodges. Him and Hard Rope, California Joe, and Custer had better ease up the slope and take a look. With a curt nod, Custer motioned him ahead.

Atop the abandoned silence of Double Wolf's sentry post, the four men lay, belly-flat, their eyes straining the puddled darkness below. Custer could see nothing, hear nothing. California Joe and Kelso fared little better. But Hard Rope had Indian eyes. And ears.

"Me hear dog bark." The deep

grunt swung the eyes of the listening white men in his direction.

"I heard nothing," Custer's whisper went to Kelso. "And I can't see a blessed thing."

"Hold up, General. I got the dog, just now. Hear it?"

Custer nodded. There *was* a dog barking.

"Me see ponies. This side river. You see, General?"

"Where, Hard Rope?" Custer's glance swung to follow the point of the Osage's arm. "Why bless you, man, those are trees—or buffalo—yes, by the Lord, they're buffalo! By thunder, Joshua, you were wrong, sir. There are no Indians down there!"

"Him Indian, all right." Hard Rope's grunt passed unheeded.

"They're buffalo, must be a thousand of them—" Custer was still pressing Kelso.

"There's a thousand of them, all right, General," the big scout's voice dropped with the nod, "but they ain't buffalo. And hold your talk down, we can't afford to spook the crazy devils. Them's ponies, General."

"I'm not satisfied, Joshua. I remain confident they're buffalo, dogs or no dogs. I think your Indians have gone, sir, leaving a camp cur or two behind as they always do."

"No buffalo—ponies," grunted the persistent Hard Rope.

"If they're buffalo," grinned Kelso, "I'd sure as hell like to know who hung them bells on 'em! Let's go, General."

Custer's scowl died a-borning. Up from below, tinkle-clear from the spreading shadow of the big herd, came the brassy jangle of a grazing bell. It was overlain by the answering music of a second. And a third.

"Like you said, Joshua, let us go." The quick smile faded in the moment of its flashing, the pale-eyed stare which replaced it putting the gray iron of carbine-close reality to the grim conclusion. "And may God have mercy on Black Kettle's soul. I shall not!"

Beyond the shelter of Double Wolf's hill, Custer readied his column. The one-day ration of coffee and hardtack brought from the base camp on the Canadian was dumped on the Washita snows. This was followed by the single saddlebag of oats each man had along for his horse. The troopers carried only their ammunition issue of 100 rounds each, and their unbooted Spencer carbines. Even the heavy field overcoats were ordered stripped off and discarded, the huddled men waiting in their issue shirtsleeves for the final "forward ho."

There was to be no company talk, no shouted commands, no bugles blown ahead of the advance. Smoking was forbidden and the man who struck a flint or match within the ranks did so in the face of a field-order death sentence.

Kelso could see the commands beginning to take form. Moving the gray mare up to Custer's staff group, he was able to catch the last of the little Colonel's orders.

There would be four attack columns, two of them moving as a unit under Custer. Of the two separate commands, Major Joel Elliott would have one, to swing wide around the camp to the south and to come back

up and attack from the east. The other, under Colonel Edward Meyers, was to swing off on Custer's right and between him and Elliott, to attack from the south. The third column under Captain William Thompson would move on Custer's left and in direct co-operation with the commander, to attack from the present, or western, position. The ammunition wagons would be left behind the hill with the abandoned supplies.

Elliott's column moved out first, Meyers's holding up for fifteen interminable minutes, then following off in planned succession. Custer, sitting his bay buffalo horse, sided by Kelso and Captain Thompson, watched the slow crawl of the minute hand on the big gold watch. Presently he glanced toward the paling gray of the eastern starfields, nodded quietly to young Thompson.

"All right, Captain, let's go. Hold to a walk until we've been given away."

The double column of Custer's and Thompson's 400 troopers split like a snake's tongue around the narrow base of Black Kettle's watchtower, converging on the far side toward the dark cone of the solitary tipi flanking the hostile camp's side of the hill. Double Wolf's woman, out with the dawn to scrabble firewood for her breakfast pot of pemmican, dropped her cottonwood faggots to stare in unbelieving terror. The next instant she had slipped into the brush and was scuttling for the lodge.

Double Wolf, still sleepy from his night's vigil, rubbed his eyes, saw the squaw seize their two small children and drag them toward the tipi flap. Heard the warning of her single word, "Soldiers!" Was, the next moment, wrenching back the side-built percussion hammer of his ancient rifle.

Stumbling outside, he watched the squaw fade into the nearby-brush. turned in time to see the hated silhouettes of the black-hatted Pony Soldiers topping the rise behind him.

Double Wolf was a "peaceful" Cheyenne. But he had been at Sand Creek. Had seen his other squaw and four young children ridden down and riddled with carbine slugs. Saw, now, their blood on the snow again. Forgot, in its red blindness, the insistent order of old Black Kettle to raise the white rags if the soldiers came. Raised, instead, his old percussion piece and fired it.

His twisting body was nearly torn in two by the answering burst of soldier lead, his last memory that of the blare of Yellow Hair's bugler sounding the charge. The instantness of his death spared him the ignominy of hearing its blatant signal echoed by the brassy notes of Custer's omnipresent regimental musicians blasting away at *Garry Owen*, the war song of the 7th Cavalry.

The Battle of the Washita was begun.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Death of a War Chief

CUSTER'S long column splashed through the waist-deep waters of the Washita and sent their horses scrambling up the steep cut-bank

atop which stood the cluster of perhaps sixty lodges which had chosen to remain camped with Black Kettle. As the General's troopers topped the bank from the northwest, the first of Meyers's cavalrymen dashed up from the south. There was no sign of Elliott.

Kelso, riding ahead of the shouting Custer, saw Black Kettle's squaw run from the big lodge to race for one of the two tethered ponies. A moment later the old chief ran out, waving and calling to the troopers.

Firing was general now and the few other braves running half-naked from the surrounding lodges, were beginning to go down. Only a handful of these were armed, and but one or two of them discharged their guns.

Black Kettle, apparently, had not thought to seize his faithfully prepared flag of truce. Perhaps the surprise was too complete. The panic memory of the Sand Creek Massacre too overwhelming. The pathetic tatter of the dirty white feedsack was later found within his lodge, trustingly stacked alongside his buffalo lance and White Horse Lodge ceremonial bonnet.

Seeing his frantic gestures unheeded, the old man turned and stumbled toward Antelope Woman, the bullets of the laughing, cheering troops kicking and whining around his heels. The tethered ponies were lunging at their halter ropes, defying the efforts of the squaw to approach them. Black Kettle seized the mane of the nearest, vaulted to its back. Slashing the picket line with his knife, he drove the squealing animal toward Antelope Woman, dragging her up behind him.

Kelso's bawling shouts of protest to the milling troopers were drowned out by the renewed burst of fire poured after the escaping chief. Custer, himself, rode the scout aside in his fury to follow Black Kettle. Fighting the gray mare free of the wildly firing melee, the mountain man threw his glance toward the lodge in time to see a third red figure dart from its entrance.

Somehow Monaseetah made it to the second pony, slashed the maddened animal free, made a running-mount swing-up, and drove in a headlong gallop for the screen of the down-river cottonwoods. He had no time to see if she made it clear or not, the converging rush of Meyers's troops catching him up and sweeping him toward the Washita. There he was in vicious-cursed time to see the end of a Plains Indian era.

Black Kettle's pony, both riders still mounted, had run the ragged blockade of the troopers' fire to reach the river's edge. And more, had managed to land upright in the shallow stream and keep going for the far side.

But that was all. The pony staggered, hit and ripped from haunch to wither by a dozen .54-caliber Spencer slugs. He went down in a smother of gray water and bloodfoam. Still he regained his feet, bearing only the squaw now. He had gone three lurching steps when Antelope Woman threw her hands back to her kidneys and slid off into the water, her body bobbing, facedown, not two yards from that of Black Kettle.

Kelso had to swallow hard, the nausea welling sickeningly within him.

Black Kettle was dead. Murdered. Shot in the back as he fled, weaponless and with his woman mounted behind him, before the senseless fire of the Soldier Chief with whom he thought he had made an honest and honorable peace. As the mountain man watched, the last miserable coup was struck in the name of that "peace."

Hard Rope and his Indian scouts charged their rat-tailed ponies down the cut-bank and into the Washita. One of them leaped off his mount, knotted his hand among the gray braids, lifted the bullet-torn face above the water. The knife did its shameful work quickly. Moxtaveto, the Last War Chief of the Southern Cheyenne sank beneath the Washita, scalped by a two-dollar butcher knife and a vermin-dirty Osage buck who in Indian life would not have been fit to feed his poorest pony.

Kelso turned from the river, wanting to vomit. But the death of Black Kettle was the bare beginning.

Custer's military planning had been typically efficient. Thompson's column held the north bank. Custer's troops commanded the south bank as well as the entry into Black Kettle's village from the west. To the south, below the camp, sealing it off from the main hostile strength downriver, stood the 225 troops of Colonel Edward Meyers. It was presumed at the moment that Elliott had pushed on ahead between Custer and Meyers and had his troops somewhere along the river between the latter and the main hostile encampment in the Big Bend. Yellow Hair had his Indians where he wanted them, and where he wanted them was dead.

The execution proceeded.

In the dead chief's isolated group of loyal lodges were perhaps 175 warriors and teen-age boys, with half that many squaws and small children. A group of 80 braves led by old Magpie reached the river and began fighting their way downstream behind its steep banks, Magpie and five others going down in the initial break. The remainder of Black Kettle's warriors, cut off by Meyers from their pony herd and by Custer from the river, were trapped.

Custer quickly stationed Lieutenant Billy Cook with forty sharpshooters on the south bank below the village. He then swung around above the village and drove east through it with his main command.

As the braves fled ahead of Custer, they ran into the crossfire of Cook's sharpshooters and Meyers's regular troops. Those few who made the river were under Thompson's rifles holding the north bank. It was a carnage. Twenty minutes could not have passed before the last brave left among the lodges was shot to pieces and the last squaw and child captured.

Custer, with Kelso back at his side, now turned his attention to the surviving group holed up along the Washita. Taking Cook's sharpshooters back across the channel, he turned their fire into the flank of the trapped braves. As the warriors broke and fled down-stream, the mountain man counted seventeen bodies bobbing in the bank shallows at the bluff's base.

From the south bank, now, in the direction taken by the fleeing Cheyenne, came the heavy boom of a .54-caliber Spencer volley. Custer, light

eyes blazing, whirled on Kelso with his first words to the scout since ordering the bugles blown.

"By the Lord, Joshua, that's Elliott down there! He's got them! Let's get down there and give him a hand, sir. That's the last of the red scoundrels, by Heaven!"

"We'd best get down there, all right," the big scout grunted. "But that ain't the last of them, General. It ain't hardly the first."

"What do you mean by that, sir?"

"Cuss it, General, I already told you there was better'n three thousand of them *below* the Bend. We ain't even hit the Bend yet. But Elliott has, he's right on it. And happen he goes a step farther, he's dead. We got to head him off, I reckon."

"All right, let's go, sir." With the words, Custer was waving Cook's command forward, putting his bay buffalo horse back into the Washita, grinning over his shoulder at the following Kelso. "I still think you've lost your Indian touch, Joshua. We haven't yet seen a solitary one of your three thousand 'hidden braves'."

"You'll see them, mister," the scout muttered to himself, and put the gray mare to breasting the croup-deep current.

Custer, rejoined on the south bank by his main command, led the 300 troopers down the Washita at a hand gallop, the absence of hostile resistance broadening the grin he flung at Kelso. The scout took the grin, not bothering to give it back. And with quickly evident reason.

Ahead, now, the heavy firing of Elliott's command fell off. Seconds after the impact of this fact reached Custer, he rode into the rear of Elliott's retiring troops. The column was in good order and the young lieutenant commanding its rear informed Custer they had caught and killed thirty-eight Cheyenne in a ravine just ahead. Then the hills to their right and left had begun to fill with fresh warriors, apparently from the downriver camps. The lieutenant had not seen Elliott, himself, but had assumed the order to fall back had been given when the ranks in front of him began to do so.

Custer, on the point of moving forward to seek out Elliott, felt Kelso's big hand on his arm. "Hold up, General. I reckon you'd best wait and let me mosey on ahead. I smell a rat here somewheres. Lookit yonder."

Custer, following the point of the long arm saw the bobbing rows of war-bonnet and rifle-barrel flashings beginning to sprout in the morning sun along the near-by hilltops.

"Arapahoe," nodded the scout. "That's Big Mouth there in that cart-wheel war bonnet. We're in trouble, General. Best let me go on up while you unscramble these boys here."

"All right, sir." Custer's decision came with his second look at the growing clouds of warriors along the encircling hills. "Get up there and locate Elliott. Bring him back here at once, do you understand, Joshua?"

Kelso understood. Wasted no time in spurring the gray mare forward. A man could smell that rat for sure now. It smelled red. And it smelled *dead.*

Five minutes after leaving Custer, Kelso rode into the abattoir of "Elliott's ravine." He found the thirty-eight dead Cheyenne, all right, along

with something else the young lieutenant had neglected to mention—half a dozen mutilated white troopers. Of this number, one man was still alive.

Kelso didn't bother moving him. A man could see the bullet hole going in through the belly just under the heart. And the three, lower down, coming out through the belly from the back.

"What's your name, soldier? What outfit?" The scout got an arm under his head. "What happened here? Talk while you kin, son—"

The soldier nodded, letting the man know he understood. When it came, his voice was clear and easy like a man's will sometimes strangely be when he is shot to shreds and shouldn't be alive.

"Harry Mercer, corporal, Company E. Major Elliott. Some of this Injun bunch got away on down the river. Major called for volunteers and went after them—" The boy's voice faltered, his eyes straining to focus on the mountain man's face.

"You're Kelso, ain't you? The General's scout?"

The mountain man nodded, seeing the eyelids sag.

"Funny thing—" the trooper muttered, just before the blood came. "Them Injuns, they had that purty Cheyenne gal with them, Gosh, but ain't she a looker, though—"

This time the eyes stopped moving, the hemorrhage welling silently from the slack mouth.

Kelso laid the boy's head down, stepped to the gray mare. A man had his orders—find Elliott and bring him back. Now he knew where Elliott was. Knew, too, that Monaseetah was still alive and close ahead of the officer. A mile down the Washita, he found them both.

The unmistakable bull-roar of the big-caliber Spencers broke on his ears as he rounded the last bluff before the open grass of the Big Bend. On the west bank of the little creek which was southern tributary to the Washita at the point, Elliott and his band of volunteers had trapped the last of Black Kettle's Cheyenne. The dozen braves were dead before Kelso got the gray mare up to the creek bank. As he rode in, the major's men were jubilantly examining their kills, along with their four captives—Monaseetah and three of Magpie's small children.

Moving toward the girl, Kelso caught the warning flash of her scowl. "Do not speak to me, *Veho*!" she hissed. "The Dog Soldiers are watching. They must not see!"

The white scout's surprise and any exploration of it were cut off by Elliott's greeting:

"Kelso, by God. Glad to see you, man. How's the General doing? Where is he?"

"Back yonder past your ravine. He sent me up to tell you to get on back. He's got his hands full of Arapahoe back there, and you got nothin' but more of the same plus Dog Soldiers and Stone Calf's Cheyenne ahead of you. We'd best get the hell shut of here, Major."

"Good enough, Kelso. Perhaps you're right. I mean to go just beyond this creek to make sure we've cleaned them all out down this way, then we'll head back. Fair enough?"

"I wouldn't go past the creek, Major. I—" The scout's warning was

cut off, unheeded, the officer already turning to issue his orders.

"Sergeant Kennedy—" a burly sergeant-major moved forward— "take this girl and these children back to the village. We'll follow on as soon as I've had a look across the creek."

"Major, you'd best stay on this side." Kelso kneed the mare toward the officer's mount. "I reckon we're likely cut off even if we head back now. Whatever you do, don't send that gal off with just the sergeant. He'll never make it in by himself like that."

"Nonsense! We'll be right behind him. However, you may go along with them if you wish."

"I was told to bring you in."

"Very well, suit yourself, sir. Here we go."

Elliott and his eighteen men, Kelso counting them as they crossed the little stream, forded the creek and pushed out into the open of the Big Bend grasslands. But not far. Just far enough to clear the Washita timber and get a good look ahead. The meadow was alive with warriors.

"Cheyenne," grunted Kelso. "Stone Calf's boys. We're done, Major."

Too late Elliott saw his situation. As he ordered his troops back across the creek, that last slim exit was blocked. From the mouth of the stream's channel through the southern hills, Mad Wolf led his Dog Soldiers. They swept down the west bank, the bulk of them holding up at the Washita, a small band under Mad Wolf sweeping off to engulf the still visible figures of Sergeant-Major Kennedy and his Cheyenne captives.

"We got one chance, Major. Gather your boys and try to bust through them Dog Soldiers right now." Kelso's final words went flat. "Whatever you do, for God's sake don't stop and hole up here!"

Again the scout's warnings went unheeded, Elliott turning his horse for the heavy grass of the creekbank. There he dismounted his men and to Kelso's complete amazement ordered their horses turned loose. Quite clearly Major Joel Elliott meant to do or die right where he stood.

The mountain man could not know that as the young officer had dashed off in pursuit of the ravine survivors he had shouted to his volunteers, "Well here goes for a brevet or a coffin!" But had the scout heard the famous phrase he could at the present moment have guaranteed its final, grim choice without a second's hesitation.

Major Joel Elliott was standing in the shoulder-high sideboards of his creek-grass coffin as of right then.

His men could see nothing. Their field of fire was point-blank zero. In the flat of the Bend ahead circled Stone Calf's Cheyenne. To the rear milled the black-feathered mass of the Dog Soldiers. And across the Washita Little Raven was now leading the remaining Arapahoe onto the hills covering the left flank. Sergeant-Major Kennedy was dead and with him the last chance of getting word to Custer. Unless—

"Major—" it was a statement, not a question—" I still got *my* horse and I aim to use her. If you kin hang on here I'll try and make it to the General. Gimme a little burst for cover toward the river. Now remember, boy, don't waste no lead on long

shots. Save it all for when they rush you."

He booted the mare out the riverside exit of the creek grass before the officer could answer. His only remembered view of Major Elliott was the bent-double glance he flung back in time to catch the officer's yellow-gauntleted wave of understanding.

It was the last any white man saw or knew of Elliott and his men. All that was ever heard of the way and speed with which they died would come years later in the cracked voice of Roman Nose Thunder, one of the hostile Cheyenne, speaking from the time-distant removal of an Oklahoma reservation:

"The shooting was over then. All the soldiers were dead. The fight did not last longer than it would take a man to smoke a pipe four times."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Yellow Hair's Way

ACROSS the creek, the Dog Soldiers saw the gray dart of Kelso's mare streak for the Washita. Their barking wolf-howls of discovery were stilled by Mad Wolf's shout:

"He is mine! It is my vow. I claim the first coup on him. He cannot get away and he is mine alone. Who will deny it?"

Clearly none of the Dog Soldiers were of a mind to rob their chief of this long-awaited honor. It was true what he said, anyway. Ota Kte could not get away. Let Axhonehe have him. Across the creek were scalps enough for all!

Mad Wolf, not waiting to hear his challenge accepted or denied, was plunging his piebald roan into the Washita. Behind him his faithful turned their attentions to Elliott's doomed command.

It was perhaps only after three or four minutes of the resumed firing that Yellow Buffalo looked at Big Body and nodded. The hulking brave returned the nod with loose-grinned understanding. Where Axhonehe went, there went his two lieutenants. Only of course it was just the better part of policy not to let him know he was being disobeyed. Unnoticed, the two subchiefs fell back from the lines, caught up their ponies and headed up the Washita after their leader.

But seconds before they departed, another of their relatives had taken the same course before them. And with even less notice. As Yellow Buffalo and Big Body cursed their ponies forward, Monaseetah had already slipped away from the red ranks of her "rescuers" to swing up on her calico mare and race westward along the curving banks of the Washita. The unseen, crossriver course of her white lover was clearly marked by the yelping wolf-howls of the close-trailing Mad Wolf.

Kelso had exhausted his ammunition in his brief siding of Elliott's men. He had now between him and the closing Dog Soldier, his guts, his Green River skinning knife, and Major Coates's fast-faltering Arab mare.

In the minutes of his brief race for freedom the deep-throated fire of the

Spencers from the creek juncture behind him had begun to fail. Mad Wolf would be up to him in a dozen jumps and behind him not another ten minutes would come the main wave of the Dog Soldier pack now finishing Elliott.

If Kelso managed by some piece of outhouse luck to down the Dog Soldier chief and get on down the trail ahead of his following lodge brothers, he was still on the wrong side of the river. Ahead of him on the north bank were up to five hundred of Big Mouth's Arapahoe engaged in holding Custer down. Back of him on the same bank, providing the rest of the Dog Soldiers didn't beat them to him, he had little Raven and the rest of the Arapahoe that were presently helping polish off Major Elliott.

Custer, unless Kelso got to him, was apt to move on down the Washita and into the same trap the hostiles had closed on the valiant Elliott. Monaseetah was with the Dog Soldiers and had given every sign she meant to stay with them. Toting it all up as he threw a snap-glance over his shoulder to see that Mad Wolf's stud-horse had the chief two jumps off the gray mare's rump, a man had to admit that likely Custer was going under. And for sure Josh Kelso was.

About all a man had left right now was his sudden promise to himself to knock off that ax-headed son behind him, if it was the last mortal try he had coming. And seeing as how it was shaping up to be just that, a man might as well get on with it.

Kelso timed it hair-close enough to suit even his particular mountain tastes.

In mid-gallop he pulled the mare's head hard around and down, jerking her front feet out from under her and dropping her like a shoulder-shot elk. As he felt her go, he flung himself to the right and as far free as he could. He hit the ground hard. But not that hard he didn't see Mad Wolf's stud pile into the mare and fall with her.

The Dog Soldier saw it coming in time. Legged-off the falling pony. Turned, catlike, in mid-air to land on his feet and ready to fight. He was coming for Kelso before the shaken mountain man got his head well cleared.

The white scout had grabbed enough over-the-shoulder glances during the short chase to know that Mad Wolf had at no time unbooted his carbine. Knew by that the red son aimed to try it the hard way. An Indian never understood the white man's idea of counting coup with a rifle slug at a hundred yards. No honor in that. No courage required. No credit coming. It had to be done with the hands and with a hand weapon, close in.

If there was another thing the Indians never understood about their white brothers, it was rough-and-tumble, mountain style. Kelso closed with the Dog Soldier, his hard grin working overtime.

Getting his left shoulder high up under the pit of the hostile's upflung knife arm, he knotted his huge hands, with sudden, crushing pressure, in the small of the brave's back. With the rib-cracking squeeze of the South Park bearhug, Mad Wolf's knife hand spasmed. The nerveless fingers lost the blade's haft. The weapon slid harmlessly over Kelso's shoulder and fell to the ground.

The mountain man stepped back, kneeing his gasping victim in the groin, kicking him viciously out and away from him. Stooping, he seized the chief's knife. Sent it whirling into the hand-close Washita.

"Get up, cousin—" the white man's grunt came in belly-deep Cheyenne—"I don't want to kill a chief on the ground."

Watching the Dog Soldier regain his feet, Kelso saw the sudden widening of the slant eyes, read their message of triumph too late. He turned only in time to see the grinning Big Body start the swing of the anvil-headed war club.

His reflex side-twist saved his skull from being pulped, and that was all. The crushing six-pound weight of the anvil smashed into his chest and across his shoulder with force enough to drop a buffalo. The next instant the huge brave had scooped him from the ground and barred his sapling-thick forearm across his throat. He held him thus, belly out and helpless as a butcher-hung steer, awaiting the resumed mercies of his chief's interrupted coup-counting.

The mountain man saw Mad Wolf take the knife which Yellow Buffalo offered him. Saw him start with it toward him and Big Body. He saw something else, too, across the narrow Washita, there on the opposite bank. Big Body saw it almost as quickly as he did. But Kelso saw it the longer.

The amazed look of the cross-river discovery was still on the giant subchief's thick mouth when the neat, blue hole of the .44 Henry slug appeared an inch above his unbelieving eyebrow. He was dead instantly, Kelso breaking away from his slackening grasp to knock up the barrel of Yellow Buffalo's rifle as it leveled on the slim figure of the marksman across the river. The bullet whined harmlessly over the south-bank cottonwoods and Monaseetah, kneeling not forty yards away across the Washita, shot him through the belly.

The mountain man twisted the dying subchief's rifle from him as he fell, turned with it in time to smash its barrel-swung butt full into the face of the snarling Mad Wolf as the latter came at him with Yellow Buffalo's knife. The Dog Soldier staggered forward, Kelso moving aside to let him fall. He hit the ground, bounced over on his side, raised his broken face with a final, blind effort, collapsed into the dust and lay still.

By the time Kelso could turn from him, Monaseetah had splashed the calico mare across the Washita. She swept past him to catch up the trailing halter rope of Coates's mare. Wheeling, she galloped the led animal back to him.

"God bless you again, gal!" The awkward English stumbled out ahead of the reach of the big fist which sought and found her slim hand with the softly muttered Cheyenne transposition. "May Maheo bless you, girl. And understand you, too! God knows—" here he slipped grinningly back into the English—"Josh Kelso never will!"

"Maheo understands everything," smiled the Indian girl, with the quiet words levering three shots from Black Kettle's beautifully engraved rifle into the belly of the unconscious Mad Wolf.

They crossed the river at once, putting their horses westward along its

south bank through the thick cover of the cottonwoods. Ahead of them in Custer's direction only the occasional black-powder boom of an Indian musket with its scattered answer of Spencer fire, could now be heard. Behind them, eastward along the Washita toward Elliott's creek, all sound of firing had ceased.

Keeping to the strangely deserted banks of the river, they reached Black Kettle's village without incident, Kelso reporting to Custer on Major Elliott's situation and the certainty of its outcome.

For some reason forever a mystery to the mountain man, the little General treated the report lightly. There were at the time, he pointed out to Kelso, no less than three other detachments similarly missing. Two others, so absent, had just come in and there was no valid reason to believe Elliott and the others wouldn't show up, given good time. Of which time, he further advised the scout, there was at the moment an ample sufficiency. It was after all, only just past 10.00 a.m.

The thing now, by Heaven, was to clean up their own mess here in Black Kettle's camp. Then move on down to pick up Elliott and take care of the rest of the hostiles. That is, should any of them be disposed to continue the issue which, in Custer's happy opinion, by thunder, was highly unlikely!

Kelso changed the color of that opinion with his next words. "Take another squint through them field glasses, General. Yonder on that hill where Big Mouth has had them Arapahoe squattin' all mornin'."

Custer raised the glasses. Shortly put them down. "By Heaven, Joshua, there does seem to be quite a concentration moving up."

"Yeah, and not alone there, General. Lookit over here to the right."

Following the scout's direction the officer swung the glasses onto the southern hills. "I see, I see. Those are the Dog Soldiers, aren't they?"

"They are," agreed Kelso succinctly. "And warpainted just like yonder Arapahoe. These are all *fresh* hostiles, General, and Monaseetah tells me there's a thousand lodges of them spread for the next fifteen miles down the river. I reckon it's time we went home, General."

While Custer debated the advice, the sergeant left in charge of the abandoned overcoats and rations beyond Double Wolf's sentry hill, raced his horse into the camp to report that huge numbers of Indians were swarming in from the west. They had overrun the supply dump and taken off after the ammunition wagons.

A momentary relief was brought to this grim picture with the appearance of the wagons in question. Brake-locked and axle-squealing, their white-faced drivers slid them down the steep snows of the north bank only yards ahead of the pursuing hostiles. To the cheers of the troopers on the south bank, who did not yet understand the extremity of their position, the precious vehicles were gotten safely across.

And now Custer got down to business.

Josh Kelso knew the little General as few men did. Once you got him in a real tight, the officer hadn't been

commissioned who could outthink him. Nor outfight him. If he had a genius for walking into traps, he had an equal one for cool-ordering his way out of them. The big scout relearned that now as he watched the sudden, murderous turning of Yellow Hair's way.

Throwing Cook's sharpshooters and Meyers's unblooded troops between himself and the threatening thousands of the Arapahoe and Dog Soldiers, Custer held them at bay while his own troops methodically completed the rape of the Washita.

His surprise attack on Black Kettle's village had netted him sixty captive squaws and children. On the icy ground in and around the empty lodges lay the bodies of the Cheyenne dead: 103 warriors, 16 women, 11 children. Piled in final total before the black lodge of the slain chief, lay the naked fruits of Indian war: saddles; buffalo hides, lodgeskins, and robes; rifles and revolvers; war axes and lances; arrows and war bows; blankets, lariats, and buckskin trunks; hundreds of pounds of black powder, lead, and molded bullets; more hundreds of pounds of tobacco; and the untold tons of the winter-stored buffalo beef.

As Kelso widened his eyes to the wealth of the loot, Custer put the torch to it. He had come into the village with nothing but his men and mounts. He was going to leave it the same way. Those were his orders. The harsh commands barked out.

Using the captured rawhide lariats, the hurrying troopers began pulling over the lodges and dragging them toward the growing mountain of cowskins east of the already burning loot pile. Shortly, to the igniting flare of two hundred pounds of the captured powder, the winter homes of Black Kettle's Cheyenne were adding their greasy smoke to that of the other camp plunder.

Calling Kelso and California Joe to him, Custer gave the final order—take Hard Rope's Osages and drive in the captured pony herd. There was one, last chance to break the pressure of the hostile assault building against Cook's and Meyers's delaying force. Kill a Plains Indian, and two will spring to take his place. Destroy his pony, and his heart for war drops dead within him.

There were by this time fully 3000 Arapahoe and Cheyenne on the surrounding hillsides. More were riding up by the minute. The situation, already grave, bid fair to disintegrate before the retirement could be begun.

As for that retirement, Custer knew no less certainly than did Kelso, that were it not possible to create some major diversion in its face, what might begin as an orderly evacuation would become a disastrous rout. The Indians were forcing the holding troops back into the village. If the movement were not speedily abated, Custer would join Elliott in his brevetless coffin on the Washita.

As the little General, completely oblivious to the hail of Indian lead, rode the flanks and center of Meyers's and Cook's failing lines, Kelso spurred to his side.

"California's got them comin', General. Where do you want them?"

"What's the best place, Joshua? You know these red rascals better than I."

"East of the camp, there." Kelso

pointed the spot. "On that clear strip of high ground along the river. The Injuns kin look square down us from them hills. They'll see it all."

"Get to it, please—" Custer's words were unhurried— "they're pushing us, sir."

Kelso wheeled the gray mare to meet the advancing front of the wild-eyed Cheyenne pony herd. "Up on the point yonder, Joe!" The other scout returned his stirrup-standing wave. "Where the red sons kin see down on them when we cut loose."

In three minutes the scouts had the huge herd in a neighing, kicking mill on the high ground of Kelso's choice. In five, the butchering began. Custer, throwing his entire reserve into the caving forward line, shouted to Cook to pull his sharpshooters out and report to Kelso at the pony herd. Joining the scouts, the young lieutenant merely waved his hand in reply to the mountain man's signal. It was a little late in the day for formal orders. Given or taken.

For a solid hour Kelso's executioners poured their ceaseless crossfire into screaming mass of the hostile ponies. On the watching hillsides the packed ranks of the hostiles grew hushed. The trampled snow around the herd became a fetlock-deep morass of blood-slush and acrid, green manure. Still, and interminably, the roar of the short Spencers and the hollow cough of the mountain rifles snarled on.

The Indians were moving, now. Slowly at first, and in small groups. Then more swiftly. By the dozens, and the tens of hundreds. Eastward they went, away and across the silent hills. Down and along the crimsoning Washita. Their savage voices were stilled. The barrels of their long forgotten rifles, cold. Their wild hearts within them, gray and heavy as the river ice.

The war ponies were dead. And dead with them, the wills and minds of their nomad red masters.

No formal count of that pony herd was ever made. But in the minutes of its hurried rounding up, the practiced eye of California Joe had rough-guessed it at better than 900. When the barking volleys of Custer's powder-grimed riflemen ceased, not a Southern Cheyenne pony was standing on the blood frozen floor of Josh Kelso's Washita slaughterhouse.

Yellow Hair had had his way.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Waniyetula's Blessing

THE parting with Custer was abrupt. The retreat to the base camp on the Canadian, under forced and fearful march, the men without rations or overcoats in the bone-chill of the Arkansas winter, the horses gaunted from forty-eight hours without feed or any respite long enough for a cinch to be loosened, was completed with nightfall of the fateful 27th.

No sign of follow-up by the overwhelming numbers of the Washita hostiles developed, Custer's concern they would sweep north around his flanks to destroy his undefended supply train at the main crossing, proving unfounded. By 9.00 p.m. the last of the hollow-cheeked officers and men and the blanket-wrapped, bitter-

eyed Indian women had re-crossed Custer's Rubicon.

The following day the retreat was resumed, still under forced march, Camp Supply being reached some time late in the afternoon of the 29th. With the surviving regulars gratefully billeted in the long rows of stove-warmed Sibleys, the wounded under delayed treatment in the rough board hospital barracks, and the dead laid in staring-eyed, stiff-limbed state on the frozen dirt floor of a company woodshed, Kelso sought out his famous employer.

His long-striding progress toward the plank door of Custer's sod-roofed quarters was rudely barred by the carbine of a pea-green Guard Corporal whose sole contribution to the Washita campaign had been the policing of the near-empty stables of the base camp during the 7th's brief absence.

"Sorry, buddy. Colonel's orders. He ain't seein' nobody."

"He'll see me. Tell him Josh Kelso is outside."

"No luck, buddy. Sherman and Sheridan are both in there."

"It don't cramp me none if Grant's in there." The mountain man's jaw moved out. "Tell him Josh Kelso wants to see him. Me and the Injun gal is leavin'."

"Listen, buddy—" the young trooper's tone turned belligerent—"move along now, see? There ain't nobody less than two stars ranks a break-in on the Colonel right now!"

The corporal's attitude underwent some hasty modification with his feet treading empty air and the scout's hair-backed fist knotted in the upper blouse buttons of his issue blues.

"All right, mister, all right! You needn't go to gettin' sore. I'll fetch him out to you."

"See you do," nodded Kelso. "And don't drag your feet. I ain't got all winter."

The young soldier was back before the mountain man had more then time to hawk and spit disgustedly into the parade ground slush. His attitude had altered again, this time clearly toward the superior.

"Colonel says he'll send for you," he smirked. "Says you ain't to worry about your pay, he'll see you get it." The trooper paused, savoring the tidbit. "Oh, yeah, and he says the Injun gal stays here same as the other squaws. She's a prisoner, buddy, and'll go east with the others. You got any more billy-doos fer the Colonel, buddy?"

"Yeah, *buddy*." The mountain man's unsmiling grunt came as he turned to go. "Tell him Black Kettle and Josh Kelso said good-by."

The big scout moved quickly, the full dark of the Arkansas winter night coming down, black and sullen, to screen his movements. It was no trick to slip around the huddled guard detail at the loose-stock horse herd. Nor to snake old Wasiya and the girl's paint mare out from under their night-blind noses. After that it got a little thicker.

All the same, he was shortly able to dig their two saddles out of the ruck-pile of the 7th's unloaded wagons. Then to smuggle his own and Black Kettle's Henry repeaters out of the scout barracks, and to rummage up a sack of rolled oats and another of

hardtack and army-dried beef. And finally to get the whole kit and kaboodle of the borrowed plunder stowed safe away back of the last stable south of camp without anybody but him and the horses got wind of it.

By a quarter of ten he was ready to move.

The captive Cheyenne squaws were being held under a "loose herd" no more humane nor well tended than that of their snow-covered ponies. Their guttering cookfires dotted the manure-stinking confines of an empty open hayshed and barepole corral, just beyond the last stable building.

Getting Monaseetah out of the mess was no more than a matter of waiting for the three troopers on guard to finish one of their slipshod inspection rounds and return to the comfort of their big fire and battered tin of boiling coffee.

The girl caught his grunting, perfect imitation of a Cheyenne pony whicker. She looked up, returned the rapid movement of his hand-sign, slipped quietly away from the tiny fire she was sharing with a dozen older squaws. She was at his side seconds later, bearing the pathetic but eminently practical total of her highborn, Plains Indian dowry—two calfskin sleeping robes saved from the burning spoils of Black Kettle's lodge.

By 10.00 p.m. the double line of their pony prints was three miles south of Camp Supply. Eight hours later they had crossed the Canadian and were safely camped in the stormproof shelter of the Antelope Hills.

To the north, sixty miles, Yellow Hair was being routed from the 5.00 a.m. blackness of his conqueror's bed, being unhappily informed that his pet scout and prize Indian captive had departed in the unknown hours. To the south and east, forty remembered miles, Black Kettle was sleeping undisturbed, still and quiet with his faithful woman beneath the winter-calm waters of his native Washita.

Above it all, Waniyetula was again laying the thick white cover of his will. But the old God wasn't howling now. Nor even bitterly laughing. He was chuckling, as he carefully filled the telltale, southpointing hoofprints of the Sioux gelding and the Cheyenne mare. Smiling as he drew the peaceful blanket of his friendly snows over the snug, dry resting place of Ota Kte and Emoonesta.

Bright Hair, his Indian child, had bested him. Even that rascal of a *Veho*, that puny, whiteskinned villain of a Pony Soldier scout, had taught him a lesson or two. *Eszenistoz*. Give them a red god's blessing. They were well mated, those two!

Let them dream there under that snug bank. Let them move in long-drawn passion there, their bodies close beneath the soft-tanned wrap of the old chief's calfskin robes. Let them rest now, their grateful voices low and tender with the moment, their tingling muscles easing.

Aye, even hold one's breath a little stiller now, that she might miss no word of the Veho's vision. Of that promise of the endless herd of spotted buffalo he would bring to graze the rich, fat grasses of Moxtaveto's valley. Of how, in the moons to come they would prosper, Emoonesta and Ota Kte, brightening the dead chief's homeland with the unfrightened voices of their many children.

And now stop the snow flurries, altogether. That the fall of no least wandering flake should disturb the softness of her answer. Let the listening *Veho* hear its every full-lipped whisper. Let him know that this was the way old Moxtaveto had seen it over the smoke spirals of his last pipe. Let Ota Kte know that this was the way, even exactly as he was telling it to her, that the ageing chief had spoken it to Emoonesta that last night within the big black lodge.

Let Yellow Hair come, the old man had said. Let him have his wanton hour of shameful war. Give him the little minute of his wilful, bitter pleasure. Then let him go, and let him come no more.

Let there be peace, not war, along the Washita. And let that peace come with the growing herds and the smiling, happy children of Ota Kte and Emoonesta.

Yellow Hair had had his way. Now let Black Kettle have his.

Nohetto. Let that be the final end to it. . . .

THE END

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A Novelette

Roamin' Ross takes a hand in politics south of the border—and in planning a ranching revolution across the Pacific!

Alias Ross Ringler

By GEORGE C. APPELL

CHAPTER ONE

Pretty Good for an Old Man

MAJOR Quintus Rolt had the strange feeling that he was suspended in space, though his boots were deep in Arizona dust and behind him rose the pink escarpments of the Gila ranges. Ahead, afternoon sun streamed across the desert's tawny floor and silvered the stunted cacti. In the southern distance, a haze lay over Sonora.

And somewhere in that haze, or just beyond it, was the reason for the major's sensation of being suspended helplessly without form or strength in the hot atmosphere: El Borracho—The Drunkard. El Borracho had just raided up into Arizona again, leaving Rolt with his galluses down and his twin-troop post at Watering Call, all of which had created this helpless feeling. Futile anger crawled through him as he watched the far heat haze, because he was forbidden by order to pursue across The Line. All he could do was watch.

A wood detail that had come all the way from the Organ Pipes filed through the stockade gates and lumbered its wagons toward the mess shack.

The new officer-of-the-day ambled

from headquarters, sunlight catching his spurs; and Guard Call went. Its brassy impudence echoed south, as if to taunt El Borracho.

Still did Rolt watch the lavender haze over Sonora, as if by sheer will power he could conjure up the person of El Borracho and place hands upon him. Though actually and secretly, Rolt admired the *insurrecto* leader. There was something of Jeb Stuart to this recently-risen rebel, something utterly gallant and reckless and at the same time something that magnificently tooled him to his job. For it required a large degree of magnificence to cross into Arizona and kidnap eleven well-guarded Sonoran state officials who had absconded north with public funds—because they had been afraid that El Borracho's revolt would succeed—and then race back into Mexico again with a laugh for crooked authority and a fillip for all the yesterdays.

Major Rolt's breath left his lungs in a long, weary gust. He turned away from the guard formation and entered headquarters and sent a runner for his chief civilian scout, Mister Ross Ringler.

Mr. Ringler, at that moment, was behind the stables teaching a corporal how to roll dice in such a way that the desired number would always come up—if you are quick, if you are armed, if you have a route of withdrawal open and ready.

Standing behind Ringler, hands on hips, head bent, bronze features set in solemn fascination and approval, was Mr. Chang-I-Wei, once of Yunnan Province, China, more lately of the Central Pacific Railroad, and currently the personal property of Ross Ringler. Mr. Chang's clothing was an admixture of a faded checkered shirt, antelope-faced trousers patched with canvas, and cutdown Wellington boots with brass spurs.

The headquarters runner broke up the demonstration with Major Rolt's request, and Ross flipped the dice, caught them, and pocketed them.

"Just remember, Corp'r'l, that you got to be quick."

Ross lanked away from the stables, tarnished spurs chinking, arms swinging, long thighs driving and thrusting. Lengthy of bone, Ross Ringler, and with weather-cured skin and slitted blue eyes and hair that had once been sandy but which now was powdered with the grayness of accumulating years. Lithe and graceful still, though, and with little of the slowness of age to him.

Major Rolt took tanned fingers from his thin jaws and regarded Ross angrily. "It was damned nice of you to let El Borracho slip into the Gilas and snatch those Sonoran officials. You're supposed to be my eyes—if you recall what you're paid for."

"Which I surely do, Quint." Ross whipped off his hat and whacked dust from his jeans, which made Mr. Chang cough fitfully. Ross pointed to him. "Chang, here, an' me were in the Gilas last week, an' we told them fat greasers to move camp else they'd be grabbed, an' they got grabbed. The You-nited States Army pays me for scoutin', not nursin.'"

Quintus Rolt nodded curtly. "Maybe you would like to mosey down into Sonora with Chang and find out where El Borracho plans to cross The Line again. That is"—the major's smile was cold—"if you can stay

away from the senoritas long enough." Then his eyes danced. "Though I don't suppose you have much time left for that sort of thing."

Ross stiffened all over. "Quint, I've knowed you for almost twenty years, or since you last got promoted, an' only because of that acquaintanceship am I refrainin' from skinnin' you alive in repayment for your bad manners."

Chang-I-Wei returned his handkerchief to his shirt pocket and stepped to the major's desk. Chang was short and rotund and shiny, so that you expected him to bounce softly when he moved. But he didn't, he rolled in one continuous motion of muscles and limbs that gave an effect of well-oiled strength. The rotundity merely reflected the fun of the journey that had got him this far through life.

He blinked lidless eyes dampishly and sucked in a breath. "Major, it is an honorable pity that we must combat El Borracho at all. Ever since I first lifted a pick for the Central Pacific Railroad ten years ago, I have heard the sound and smelled the smell of corruption in Sonora. So perhaps we have in The Drunkard a Robin Hood who—"

Major Rolt was frowning horribly. It required an effort for him to speak sternly, for his heart was not in it.

"The United States must nominally respect the existing government of the state of Sonora, no matter how rotten we may think it is. This stockade is a watchdog post, nothing more." Again Rolt's eyes danced as he glanced at Ringler. "If, however, the head watchdog, succumbing to the infirmities of advancing years, cannot see the depredations of—"

Ross leaned across the crude desk and grasped Rolt's neckerchief and shook it once. "Quint, our acquaintanceship is shrinkin' rapidly from twenty years to twenty seconds, which is about when I'll knock your ears off."

He released the wilted neckerchief and stood back. "We'll go into Sonora, Chang an' me, but whether or not we'll flush The Drunkard, I do not know. I hope so, 'cause Chang's returnin' to Chiner soon an' apply his Stateside learnin' to You-nan ranchin' methods, an' El Borracho's ears'd be a nice souvenir for him to take along."

"So?" The major eyed Chang speculatively. "You have a ranch, do you?" He was thinking that here stood the damndest-looking Chinese he had ever seen.

"I will possess one, if I can ship some seed cattle home and shake down my honorable old man for land. He owns half the province, you know. He sent me here for three years to learn the heathen language and the ranching methods employed, but I have stayed for ten years."

Ross grinned happily. "Chang was the richest tie-bender who ever swung a pick. I won him last year in a poker game from a CPR division superintendent at Fort Worth."

Chang licked his lips and beamed. "The sole reason I did not appeal to my ancestors from the fate of being a poker pot was that I discerned in Ross here a potential High Keeper of the Celestial Steers."

"I know all that," Rolt said wearily. "Save the history for later. Right now, please go tail El Borracho and

tell me where he is and what he's going to do next."

Ross and Chang rode slowly, due to the late heat of the day and their desire to enter Sonora under cover of darkness. They filed away from the United States in silence, riding easy, keeping an interval between them that was short enough to permit of communication and long enough to prevent one bullet from hitting them both.

Ross was astride his old roan, Joker, whose age combined with that of his rider was almost seventy years. Chang had a quarter horse he had won at dice in Nogales, under Ross's tutelage.

The amber haze of twilight was deepening across the desert when a shadow detached itself from shadows and a voice hailed, "*Quien es*? *Quien ven*?" A stocky man was standing trailside with long arms hanging forward from his half-crouched body.

"Scout detail," Ross called.

"Yeah? An' who'd be the scouts?" The man straightened slightly, and took a step forward. His horse was pinned deep in shadows behind him.

Ross Ringler recognized that voice as being from his past, but he could not place it in any particular man's throat. It was familiar to him, but he had difficulty in associating it with a familiar face.

It is always hard to examine the gone years, the past faces, and put recognizable features together. All that Ross was sure of was that he had not liked that voice when last he had heard it. He associated it with shooting, with night, and with stampeding cattle.

And then its identity came to him as he threw a long leg off his saddle and dismounted. It clarified in his mind as he walked slowly forward through the dusk and confronted the man, who was Billy Bantry—the last of the Bantry Boys whom Ross had chased off the old Y Valley Y in Colorado, years back in time.

"Hello, Billy." He took one more step forward, crowding Bantry so that the man could not readily go for his gun. "What're you doin' down here near The Line? Huntin' prairie chickens?"

Bantry seemed to shrink. He backstepped hurriedly. "Jesus God—you!"

"Me." Ross followed him, watching his hands. "You wouldn't be lookin' for El Borracho too—would you? Or maybe you're workin' for that noble Sonoran cavalry leader, El Coronel Ventura."

Bantry stopped, arms dangling at his sides. "Lissen, Ringler, I know enough about you to hang you fifty times, see? You make trouble for me, an' I'll—"

"Is that a threat?" Ross stepped in. "I don't like threats."

Bantry sprang forward in self-defense and Ross moved backwards, taking the man's heavy fists on his chest; and then reached out and chopped him down with a single rocklike blow.

He stood there, his breathing a little deeper than it should have been. watching Bantry come up and forward again. The scuffle of their boots made crunching sounds in the sand and the beat of Ringler's fists laid

flat echoes across the twilight. He knocked Bantry down again, let him rise, and slugged all consciousness from the man in sudden cold hatred and stood back from that broken nose and those crushed lips.

But Billy Bantry stayed down, this time. Ross swung into his saddle and sucked torn knuckles.

"Pretty good for an old man, eh, Chang?"

"Pretty good for a young one." Chang's face remained immobile with the inertia of centuries.

"Yeah?" And Ross Ringler smiled in the pale wash of the rising moon. "Which reminds me—a certain young lady we know lives not far south o' here. Let's pay a call."

They could not know that Colonel Ventura and his regiment of fifty men watched them as they rode, watched them from the rocks as cats watch mice in the moonlight before pouncing.

Colonel Ventura had no illusions about any Americans being his friends, no matter what side they favored. He was too wise for that—and too cruel.

CHAPTER TWO

A Social Visit

DOLORES Anna Maria Josefina Miraflores resided at the *ranch-eria* of her father, a fat man with sagging mustaches who believed in being on both sides of the political fence at the same time. It enabled him to exist in slumberous comfort with his herds, his gardens, his tequila, and his daughter.

She resembled her late mother, for which everyone thanked God—and none more fervidly than Don Pedro himself, She was lissome of line and soft of skin and bright of eye, and she needed no flower to set off her smooth dark hair, no clasp to show off her straight breasts.

She stepped from veranda shadows into the shimmering quicksilver of the moonlight and watched Ross and Chang amble toward her.

" 'Allo, Beeg Red. You come back to Dolores, no?"

"Yes." Ross grabbed her by her slim waist and lifted her high above his head, then let her down slowly. "Nee hun howkanduh. That means, 'You sure are pretty' in Chiner-talk."

"*Hable espanol.*" She led the way across the veranda and into the main room. Don Pedro's ruffled snores were the only sound in the house. "Sit down, Senor Chang. Ross, our friend Colonel Ventura has been past here recently. This El Borracho has him crazy."

"El Borracho has Major Rolt crazy, too."

Dolores produced an earthenware jar and three glasses and a plump lemon, and made tequila cocktails. "Ross, do you know what this Drunkard is now calling himself?" She handed the glasses around. "Ringler! 'Alias Ross Ringler,' he says! And do you know why?"

Her eyes were blazing, her head was arched high with the tension that was stiffening her. "To remove suspicion from himself as El Borracho—whoever he is—and put it on you, and also to embarrass the United States! Imagine having one of its citizens a rebel bandit in a foreign land!"

Ross swigged his tequila. "I heard somethin' like that along the line." He accepted a refill. "He's s'posed to look somethin' like me, I hear."

Dolores snapped daggered fingers in a dismissive gesture. "Both of you are quick, both of you are crazy. There the resemblance ends."

"*Muchisima gracias.*"

"*De nada.*" She was standing close to him. "Be careful, Ross—*cuidado.* You must promise me that."

"For more'n forty years I haven't been particular careful." He winked down at her, reached out and chucked her under the chin. "Right now, Chang an' me are lookin' for El Barracho, an' when we find him we'll report him to Major Rolt."

Dolores Miraflores drew herself up and glared at him. "You will only report him? You will not capture him? You refuse to kill him? He is a—a—" she snapped her fingers again—"a peasant, a *ladron*, a thief!"

"So's Colonel Ventura, when you come to think of it."

She struck him across the mouth, then recoiled. Quick anger and quick repentance had flickered through her almost simultaneously.

But he did not strike her in return, as he had often done during their erratic relationship. He only asked for more tequila—and made her bring it to him.

Chang roused himself and stood up. "In Yunnan Province, the only time a woman is permitted to touch a man is when she washes his feet."

"Let's go to Yunnan."

Ross drank off his tequila and handed Dolores the empty glass. But she didn't take it, she was imploring him with the eternal supplication of Isis to seize her and use her forgiveness in any way that he would.

"Grande Rojo, Beeg Red, *te amo.* Please forgive me."

Ringler scratched his high ribs and raised his brows. "Maybe I will, when me an' Chang finish lookin' for El Borracho. We mostly hunt at night, so maybe we'll be seein' you someday." He put on his hat.

"Ross—wait!"

But he was gone into the moonlight with Chang waddling after him, and presently there remained only the trit-trot of their hoofs and the low sobbing of a fairly repentant woman and the ripsaw snoring of her completely unrepentant father.

During that night there were two raids twenty miles apart, and fires bloomed brightly on the purple desert. El Borracho had put the torch to the hacienda of Don Miguel Grana, state treasurer and master of thousands of peons and *rurales*; and to the hacienda of General Ignacio Rey y Torres, state prefect of police and warden of some thousand prisoners who labored on the roads and buildings which were owned by the general.

At three a.m. the general's trousers were observed flying from a pole carried by one of El Borracho's men, and just before daylight most of the prisoners were cut free from the chains to which they had been consigned for the offense of criticizing the state government, and allowed to return to their scattered homes.

When dawn was grinning along the rim of the world, Ross Ringler and Chang-I-Wei reached The Line and were hurrying across it in order to dissociate themselves from this dangerous uprising when they were

blocked and stopped by no less a person than Colonel Ventura himself.

El Coronel wore silk underwear and sloshed his armpits full of a brothel-smelling shaving lotion. Peel made his boots, but his regiment of fifty went barefooted. His uniform was precise, flared, and Germanic in silhouette. It bore silver epaulettes, golden aguilettes, and numerous medals nobody had ever heard of.

On his own side of The Line, he carried a pair of service Colts and had himself preceded by a *teniente*, also with hand guns, and followed by another. But on the United States side, during his infrequent visits to Major Rolt, he dispensed with all this and became a jovial internationalist extending the open hand of good fellowship.

The waxed tips of his elegant mustaches met the lotioned curls of elegant sideburns on his florid cheeks. His smoldering eyes, as they focused on Ringler and Chang, were slightly luminous with madness. After all, General Rey had been his brother-in-law.

"So, Ringlair, you seek El Borracho too, eh?" El Coronel fingered his riding-crop in the way a man does who loves to crack heads. "An' who were you fighting weeth las' night—hey?"

"My conscience."

"Your—?" And the colonel threw back his head and roared. "Say, beeg boy, you see thees El Borracho?"

"We just missed him, or vice versa. I'm goin' to Major Rolt now an' report the fires."

Ventura's lids narrowed.

"Ringlair—who were you fighting weeth?"

"An old amigo named Bantry."

The colonel leaned closer. "Not El Borracho?"

"El Bor—?" Ross almost choked. He looked incredulous. "Why, damn my eyes! Billy Bantry!"

Chang-I-Wei remained fish-solemn until Ventura let them go, when he started to giggle.

"You are acquainted with some strange human animals, Ross. I like you so much that I would not harm you except to cut your honorable throat over a concubine. Let us proceed faster."

CHAPTER THREE

Good Hunting

RIDING into full daylight, well across The Line, Ross felt once again the recurring sensation of growing old too fast, of living beyond his time. Of being passed by younger men who were leaving him alone in their wake.

He did not realize what any of a dozen girls could have told him—that he was in that period of life when appearance can be the most interesting because, although mature, it is not yet decrepit.

He didn't realize it because lately he had been reflecting overly much on his past, on the long trails he had ridden and the things he had done while riding them and the persons he had done those things to. It was time to go, he kept telling himself; it was time to move on and let the younger men ride the land. And when a man came to understand that, he had to make plans for the future.

Ross Ringler never had, and the

planning of his future was confusedly new to him now. All his life, he had merely followed the sunsets and the sunrises, the rains and the snows. A drifter, really, no matter what he had done, for he had kept his restless hand at nothing for very long. Orphaned at three and left in care of an Army laundress at old Fort Wiley, he'd become stableboy, fence rider, bronc peeler, cook, scout, hunter, soldier, range detective, and gambler. And now he was an Army scout again, with the remaining years shrinking ahead of him like long corridors in an empty house.

A strident yell broke the morning silences and both he and Chang snagged out their guns—Chang nimbly, as Ross had taught him. But it was neither raiding *insurrectos* nor renegade Apaches—it was Ashbow Allen and he was sliding down the rocks pulling his pony behind him.

"Where the hell yuh bin?" he demanded petulantly. "We bin waitin' in Cedarbox Canyon."

"Quint Rolt wanted a scout made an' we made one."

Ashbow rubbed his nose. He was small and scrawny and smothered to the eyes in hair, and his buckskins were not clean. He was a trapper, prospector—whatever he could turn his hand to. "Henry's in the canyon now, waitin'."

Ashbow climbed onto his pony and jogged along beside Ross. "Yuh tell an' old friend like me that huntin' may be good down here, an' then yuh go skeedaddlin' off intuh Mexico with your slant-eyed compadre an' leave your ol' friend to hunt for quartz veins with Henry. It ain't fair, I says las' night to Henry. . . ."

Ashbow babbled on, and Ross let him babble. With old minds it is best to let them wander around in memory and complaint until they are done with it and come back to the matter in hand. That way, you don't force them beyond capacity.

"Las' time I seen ol' Doggy Trotwood up in the Tularosas, he said he'd be pokin' 'round these yere parts soon. . . ."

Henry Prairie Wolf was waiting for them in Cedarbox, lying under some junipers with a rifle across his stomach. A low scarf of smoke trailed from the gutted ash of his cook fire and faded to haze against the canyon's flinty walls. Henry was a Blackfoot who didn't feel too comfortable down here in the land of the Apache, which was why he kept the rifle close to hand. But his old *absaroka* of scootawa-boo days, Ringler, had said the hunting might be good, and to come on south with Ashbow.

Henry had already been rewarded somewhat by the revelations of Chang-I-Wei, who had averred that all North American Indians originated in China, and that therefore they were all brothers, and Henry had better return to Yunnan and be top rider for the Jade Flower ranch—which Chang planned to operate someday. Henry had never been top rider any place, nor was he likely to be on this continent.

The only thing Henry resented about Chang was his almost continual silence and the mysteriously calming influence he seemed to have on Ross, who was usually garrulous and friendly.

Ashbow blew his nose between his fingers and scowled darkly. "We seen

some mighty peculiar dust yestiddy, Big Stretch. Up by the Furnace. Then damme if it didn't blow right back to Mexico."

"More o' them fat political thieves cachin' their loot before the voters learn to read sign. There was a little trouble last night in Sonora."

Chang smiled benignly. "The eminent Number One Policeman was deprived of his trousers."

"An' most of his prisoners." Ross tried to get into the spirit of the thing but he couldn't. There was such a sense of finality to it all that he had an ache in the back of his neck and a harsh throbbing in his head. He was almost afraid—not for himself but for what might happen to all the people and places he had known, if he departed.

"Come on, Chang. We'll report to Quintus now, an' leave these two ol' timber beasts to eat jack rabbit an' sourdough. You two stay snuggled, hear? Chang an' me'll be around the Furnace in a day or so, lookin' for seed stock, an' we may need help. Keep your eyes peeled."

They returned to the twin-troop stockade by way of a sheep station on The Line proper, where Ross spoke through his side teeth to the peon herder and inquired of El Borracho and also of Colonel Ventura. The herder replied in monosyllables, answering questions and not asking them; and then Ross and Chang pushed north five miles and reported themselves to Quintus Rolt.

The major heard them out in restrained silence, snatched a map from its dusty leather case and flattened it on the desk with dry palms.

"The strikes last night were here—and here. About twenty miles apart. Here—at Palo Hondo—was where they bagged General Rey and got his pants. And over here is where they freed the prisoners. Now—did you actually see El Borracho?"

"We were ridin' too fast to see the moon, even. But we bumped into Ventura. He asked a few stupid questions, then let us go."

"Ventura!" Rolt was scornful. "He's coming here tomorrow for another conference. You'd better be around." He passed an eye over Ross's graying hair. "How're all your girls?"

"Why, every one's a potential mother, Quint. I always say, keep 'em bare-foot an' keep 'em pre—"

Boots rapped sharply on the planking outside headquarters and Rolt's door shook to the impact of drumming knuckles. It was the officer-of-the-day and he was sweating like a pump.

"Sir, word just came in from east of here that El Borracho's band raided the Sonoran arms cache an hour or so ago, near the Furnace. They got clean away to Mexico with every cartridge that General Rey and Colonel Ventura had hidden there."

El Coronel appeared at the stockade next noon with two dozen soldiers, or half of his command. He had been drunk the night before and the whites of his eyes were hound-dog pink and, despite massages and lotions, his puffy cheeks held the blood close to the skin in weeping capillaries.

He damned El Borracho and he damned the quality of the soldiery that was levied from the State of Sonora and above all he damned Grover

Cleveland for not letting Rolt assist him south of The Line.

Major Rolt, though—a tap on the major's knee with his forefinger—was his friend, and in confidence it was his duty to inform the major that if it was not for international amity, he could take Washington with his regiment in the time it would require to get there.

Rolt murmured, "Interesting," and wiped his forehead. The heat was storm heat—heavy and ringing and metallic.

"And eenteresting to me ees how El Borracho knows where the ammunition is concealed, where my camps are in Sonora, where my brother-in-law was to be sleeping."

El Coronel eyed Chang-I-Wei with something like hunger. "I am eenformed that El Borracho himself was not on yesterday's raid to the Furnace. I am further eenformed that he has a skin like bronze."

Major Rolt sat forward. "Chang is my assistant scout, and I doubt if he is El Borracho. Now, just what do you wish me to do?"

Ventura flung out his palms. "Please defend such deposits of arms as I choose to conceal here." He was white-angry inside because of his need to hide his ammunition, and he made no pretense to cover the necessity.

Then he did a thing that never left Ross Ringler's memory.

A *sarjente* in soiled white rags that were bound at the waist with a tattered cartridge belt approached and saluted limply and mentioned the intense heat outside. He suggested that if the men could disband to shadier spots—after all, El Coronel was safely on the United States side now—*el lado de los Estados Unidos*—and therefore—

El Coronel whipped out his gun and shot the *sarjente* three times in the belt buckle.

A .45 spins you off your feet fast. The *sarjente's* eyes, still alive, burned up from the floor in agony and disbelief. His fingers, glued with blood, clawed at the flame that seared his belly and bowels. His legs, trying to ease it, moved in slow agony.

Ventura tipped up his gun muzzle and blew smoke from the lip. He signaled for a wide-eyed corporal to take the dying man away. Then he holstered, took his kepi, and rose.

"My new headquarters will be at Boboquivari, Major. Please een the future look out for the extraterritorial interests of the government you are bound to recognize and respect."

And that closed the conference.

Ringler took an immense swig of tequila and announced that he was going to the Furnace for a look-see. He and Chang rode the afternoon well down toward twilight, and as they rode a brutal desert storm began to make up in the east, blackening the sky and turning the sand to white silver. Ten miles from the Furnace—that watered depression in the foothills of the Gilas—the storm broke and they turned into the teeth of it, still hoping to inspect the seed stock herded by old Jingle Bob.

Lightning flamed down around them, striking into the ground and fencing them in on all sides with a circle of flame. The vibration of thunder was endless, racketing on and on into infinity. There was no trail presently, and they couldn't have seen it if there had been one.

Ross led the way into a crevice in the rocks and pulled up under an overlapping shelf. "This is Ringler's Grand Hotel for a while."

They were both soaked to the bones. Chang pulled out a flask of tequila and handed it over. It went back and forth between them several times before they bedded their horses, bedded themselves, and tried to find sleep.

Thunder kept thumping into Ross's sodden dreams, making him cringe inwardly at the memories of old shrapnel, old cannon, old malevolent gods galloping down the skies of the limitless West. There was talk in the thunder—dead men's talk. The storms carry it eternally down the horizons, warning the living to beware.

Daybreak was damp and gray and cold, and they pressed through it toward the Furnace with faces down and reins loose, so that at first they did not hear the running of hoofs behind them. It was only when a shot cracked and a bullet whined and wet sand spurted upward that they braked on the bits and whirled, grabbing at their holsters.

Colonel Ventura was bearing down on them at the head of a ragged formation of barefooted riders who were uniform only in respect to their crossed bandoleers, battered dragoon caps, carbines poised on right thighs —and a unanimous penchant for looting and raping.

El Coronel's brown-toothed grin was triumphant. "So—I 'ave found you returning to the scene of the crime!" He said that to Chang-I-Wei, who ignored him. "Alias Ross Ringlair, so? Eet must be *el chino*, here." Ventura was holding a gun on Chang.

Ross's frayed temper came apart in a burst of profanity that was rhythmic and rolling and rich with meaning. It shocked El Coronel into relaxing his guard; it brought wide grins to the faces of his regiment. Then Ringler paused, collected breath which was becoming painfully short these days, and swung his bits directly at Ventura.

"You know what I think? I think that you're El Borracho, playin' both ends against the middle for a good thing! It'd be damned easy for someone like you to hide stuff north of The Line, then swipe it at night an' tote it back south an' blame it on somebody else. How come you're close to El Borracho's raids, yet never can prevent 'em?" Ross's blue eyes were blazing and all the age was stripped from him for a moment, leaving him shining clean once again.

El Coronel sat back against the ornate cantle of his silver-mounted saddle, slack-jawed and confused. Few persons had ever spoken to him like that before. Then the merriment of his regiment whipped his self-control back into shape and he leveled his gun at Ross and frowned horribly in the sallow light of early morning.

"You weel come weeth me to Don Miguel Grana and explain yourself!" He snarled a command over his shoulder, and fifty carbines leveled at Ross and Chang and there sounded the ragged *slick-slack* of cartridges being bolted into chambers.

A thin cry rose stridently from the sandy slopes ahead, and what happened happened suddenly, as things do on the desert. Three horsemen with white headbands plunged from

a stand of juniper and raced onto the flatland and opened fire on the regiment as they came, shooting high. One rider turned and waved behind him, as if summoning others.

Ventura swallowed, gulped, and tucked his gun into his belt.

"Apaches!" He spurred past the head of the standing column and cried an order as he went: "*La Linea*!" He fanned rowels and put his horse down the desert in the van of the retreat, followed by his bewildered and formationless regiment. He never looked back; he was too intent on escape from capture and a messy death.

The headbanded riders flew past screeching crazily, and presently Ross and Chang followed at an easy lope, saving their animals for the finish of the joke, if it was to have a finish that day. And then Ashbow Allen and Henry Prairie Wolf and old Doggy Trotwood were riding back toward them, naked to their hairy chests and peeling off their headbands as they came, laughing and cackling at the success of their happy ruse.

Ashbow spat and fingered his beard and allowed as how he'd never seen a man fly so fast without even waiting to discover that Apaches don't favor beards. "Them greasers're halfway to Panama by now, almost to South America."

Doggy Trotwood, he of the upper reaches of the Missouri and the Tularosa country, he of fifty years of combing mountain and plain for the wealth of the lost mines, reined up on a jack mule and regarded Ross with deep interest. Gaunted now and old, Doggy Trotwood, but still able to ride and to shoot.

"B'God, Ross, I ain't seed you since we chased Matt Bew off the Weepin' Woman claim in the interests of Shiloh Shattuck."

He stuck out a bony hand and Ross grasped it and held it a moment, reflecting that here again was a segment of his past, an image from the lost years that was confronting him and accusing him and defying him to stay on the land he had known.

Doggy mumbled, "Too many railroads up no'th." He grinned gummily. "Thought I'd try m' hand down here."

Henry Prairie Wolf snapped sweat from his headband and put it back in his pocket. "You hear my Blackfoot yell? That Mexkin cunnel never has learnt the difference. I didn't get it from my own people, though. Pawnee Porter taught it to me."

"I told you," Ross whispered, "that the hunting would be good." But there was no mirth in him, no sense of levity. He didn't know what the trouble was, and he was afraid to find out. "Let's go on to the Furnace and look at them cows."

There was a heaviness in him, not for his companions but for himself, an unattached and lonely man in the vastness of the world, with no lights lit for him anywhere.

CHAPTER FOUR

Settling an Old Score

THE aged herder known as Jingle Bob was squatting in the shadow of his hat in a corner of the Furnace, switching a pine goad back

and forth and watching his small herd graze near the shallow creek that looped along one side of the depression.

Chang-I-Wei dickered with him with all the airiness of one who is accustomed to having his views heard and accepted when he is addressing peasants. He spoke briefly of his vast lands in Yunnan and the desirability of importing sturdier cattle, then launched into a description of his honorable father's methods—random breeding—as opposed to his own—selective breeding.

"In China there are few cattle, no brands, no fences, but many thieves. My proposal—"

"How much you offerin'?" Jingle Bob wanted to know.

"—is to ship two dozen yearlings from San Diego to Hong Kong—"

"How much per head?"

Chang patted his comfortable belly and assumed a sorrowful attitude. "It is regrettable that the subject of money must enter this discussion so early. In my country—"

"In my country, we enter it early."

Chang lowered his chins and shook his head. He was, he said, devastated at such abruptness, at such eagerness to close the deal. Those longhorns, now; those longhorns would perhaps—but only perhaps—be suitable. As a starter, say ten dollars a head. . .

They bartered through lunch—green chilis and stale bread and tequila—and bartered into the afternoon. Ross strolled along the creek bed and inspected the stock and noted that it was, indeed, excellent stock. Ship two dozen of these to China, and in two years you'd have a nice herd started. In five years, you'd be rich—if the herd wasn't rustled meanwhile. But hell, a world without rustlers would be a dull world.

Take Billy Bantry: he and his late brothers had made life very interesting for Ross some time ago on the old Y Valley Y, and here was Billy again, lurking near The Line for whatever reasons Ross did not know. But it was sort of exciting to realize that he was around and up to something; it sort of kept a man young to be on guard against such as Billy Bantry.

Ross wondered what Chinese rustlers looked like. Chang had told him that they laid strings of firecrackers around one side of the herd at night, then ignited the string and let nature take its course. Sometimes, Chang had sworn, a herd thus rustled would run for fifty years before it got mired down.

The best way, of course, was to cut fence and throw the cows through the aperture a few at a time; but if you had no fences, such as in China, why, firecrackers were undoubtedly the best.

The dickering ended at midafternoon, and Chang paid out half the contents of his money belt to Jingle Bob, then asked Ross to heat up an iron for some quick hoof-branding.

"It is from here almost two hundred trail miles to San Diego where I will load them on a ship, and there is much danger in that distance. Or, as we say in my country, yoh hun weisyan dzai nayguh deefang lee."

"Sounds just like Ashbow when he's drunk." Ross spat his cigarette from his lips and took the light iron from Jingle Bob. "I'll twist this wire into C W for your initials, Chang.

You're now a stockman, an' qualified to run for sheriff or senator. You got to have cow dung on your boots to get elected to anythin' here."

"In my country, officials are appointed."

"Well, they are here, too, 'cept that we go through the formalities of ballotin'. It makes a big hit with the voters."

It was dusk by the time Chang's herd of twenty-four was ready for the drive to Cedarbox Canyon, where it would be fattened up for a few days before being driven west to the coast.

Jingle Bob had a final word for Ross. "I seen Billy Bantry one-two days back, lookin' hongry. You be keerful, Ross."

"He'd better be, not me. But thanks anyway for the information."

They trailed into the twilight in a long, compact mass, Ross and Chang leading, Ashbow and Henry riding flank, and Doggy Trotwood covering the drag of the plodding yearlings. On the morrow, Ross would give Major Rolt his resignation and ride on to San Diego with Chang. It was the furthest he had ever planned anything in his life.

The moon was high and wide and silver-white, and the breath of night had the taint of jasmine to it. A hill coyote was laughing and sobbing like the flesh-eating carnivore that he was, and the echoes of his bitter mirth struck into the herd's ears and brought them forward, twitching.

"Soon," Chang breathed.

"Yeah, we'll be there soon." An uneasiness was running through Ross like a cold wind through a bottom; it sent little mice feet up his spine and made him sit higher in his saddle. He had known the feeling before.

Soon, he told himself, though he wasn't exactly sure what he meant. Soon, in truth.

Behind him, the crack of ankle joints and the click of horns and the snorting of steers; ahead, silence. On each side, the limitless wash of the desert, dappled with the shadows of arroyos and cutbacks. An ageing man, Ross Ringler, riding out his destiny for whatever it would bring him.

Immediately it brought him a bright yellow flame that lashed the shadows in agony; and another as a second brush fire bloomed brightly and crackled aloud. A shot rapped and the head of the herd swayed, milled, broke apart and rumbled to the right and flowed past Ashbow and went into stampede.

Old Doggy Trotwood yelled and booted his jack mule after the fire-crazed steers; Henry Prairie Wolf rode directly toward the fires, seeking to eliminate their source, with Ross and Chang slightly ahead of him. A second shot whooped between them and three *rurales* galloped after the stampede on range ponies, arms flopping.

Chang and Henry rode them down and Ross went straight between the snapping fires and spotted a stocky man on a patch-colored pony galloping straight south in the fire-brightened moonlight. He risked a shot and missed and kept his gun out.

The quarry dodged left behind the low shoulder of a slope and Ross cut sharp left and topped the slope and descended its other side in time to surprise the man—who was waiting for him to come around the shoulder.

They fired together and Ross's sleeve was ripped and he fired again and the man hesitated in the act of turning his pony. Then he bunched himself together and kicked flank and started east away from the stampede, as if no longer interested in it.

But Ross Ringler was still interested in it, and he caught up with his quarry within a half mile and fired from fifty yards and hit the escaping pony and sent it sprawling over and over, like a sprung hoop. The rider bounced free and tried to get up, then collapsed onto his face. Suddenly he sprang over and threw his gun on Ross and almost fired—except that Ringler's next two shots carried away his lower jaw and teeth and left him stiff-dead in the moonlight.

Ross walked slowly to him, knelt and examined the blue-faced features of Billy Bantry. "You had no more sense than your brothers, tryin' to scare a trail herd that way. You should have killed our horses from ambush an' let the cows run over us with fresh blood in their nostrils. Then you'd have had a stampede for sure."

There was firing from away beyond the slope—faint tackings punched through with answering shots. Then the whole thing over again, this time more distant. Then silence.

By the time Ross caught up with it, it was over. Doggy Trotwood blew smoke from the lip of his Hawken and pointed mutely to the three *rurales*, who were lying odd-angled and quiet on the desert.

"They tried to turn the herd south, but they was too slow."

Chang and Ashbow and Henry were starting a mill now, making the stock chase their tails in an immense circle that kept getting smaller and smaller.

Before midnight, they started again for Cedarbox, but Ross Ringler was not greatly relieved. He had merely closed an old account, settled another old score, and he was that much nearer to a final balancing of the books.

Resistance stirred helplessly in him, but it hadn't much strength. Unaccountably he was irritated, and irritation made him feel better. It sat him with more fitness than did helplessness, and gave him a new sense of power.

After all, he was only forty-fifty years old, and still able to breathe.

Trailing through moon-shadow to the first escarpments of Cedarbox, he began to hum a tune:

I like the girls who do,
An' I like the girls who don't;
An' I like the girls who say they will,
Until I find they won't;
But the girls that I love best,
Who bring the most delight,
Are the girls who say they never will—
An' then I find—they might!

That braced him so firmly that he spurred Joker far ahead of the herd and laughed at the wind of his passing.

There would always be another horizon ahead for him.

Major Quintus Rolt was stamping in angry circles through the morning sunlight, waiting for Ringler to return from his look-see at the Furnace.

If Mister Ringler and his strange

Oriental friend wanted to make a scout to the scene of El Borracho's latest depredation, that was all right with the major; but if they wished to set themselves up in the cattle business on government time, that was definitely not all right.

So when Ross and Chang trotted in through the stockade gates, Rolt thrust a finger at them and was opening his mouth accusatively when Ringler shouted, "It's a lie!"

He swung off Joker and grinned at Rolt like a great, friendly mastiff. "Honest, Quint, you got more suspicions than a Mexican husband. All we done was track around the Furnace an' say hellow to Jingle Bob, an' then come in."

"Jingle Bob's a stock dealer, isn't he?" Major Rolt pointed to the headquarters building. "Let's go in there." Seated behind his plank desk, he cocked an eye on his chief scout and inquired if Colonel Ventura had been seen north of The Line.

"Why, only yesterday we seen him ridin' faster'n a jack rabbit for home, with his whole army lined out behind him. Seems two-three li'l ol' Apaches chased him."

"Renegades?" Rolt was startled. "I thought they were safely on reservations."

"Well—" Ross blew smoke from a freshly rolled cigarette and batted it aside with a huge hand "—not exactly. Just some young bucks with ginger."

Quintus Rolt's smile was sudden and broad. "All right—just some young bucks, then." He laughed. "I'd like to have seen that."

"We can re-enact the scene of the crime, Quint."

"Don't bother." Rolt sobered and leaned forward. "It appears there'll be crime aplenty unless you do something about it. Ventura can't contain these *insurrectos*—God bless 'em for what they're trying to do, though—he's relying too much on us, poised here but quite unable to unpoise or, in the vernacular, move."

"El Borracho's a better commander than El Coronel."

"Far better—even though he rarely leads his command personally." Rolt cut and lit a cigar and drew deeply on it, "Those rich Sonoran politicos can't depend on Ventura for protection, which is why they absconded up here with their swag. If El Borracho—who-ever he is—ever pulls a successful revolt before reinforcements can be sent all the way from Mexico City—which I doubt—not one grandee in Sonora will ever be safe again."

Ross heard that with interest. "I better go down there once more, Quint, an' sniff around."

The major was suspicious. "Why do you say 'once more'?"

"Because I'm fixin' to quit." Ringler swept his sweat-stained hat from the desk and twirled it. "But before I do, there won't be any more threat from south of The Line, and the sovereignty of the You-nited States will be secure once more, as the speech makers put it. Come on, Chang, let's ride the honorable horses."

They rode the day down and passed the sheep station on The Line proper and spoke with the peon herder and then rode on toward the *rancheria* of Don Pedro Miraflores. Dolores Anna Maria Josefina was waiting for them in the pale moonlight, dressed in a flowing orange skirt

and a thin silk bodice with a cross of gold pinned to the low-cut breastline —a Christian maiden, captive of the Infidels.

Chang-I-Wei decided to take a short siesta on the veranda, which left Ross alone with Dolores in the main room of the house. She raised deep dark eyes to his face and whispered the conspiratorial question:

"You found El Borracho?"

"No, but I'm tryin'." He watched her turn away, watched her mix tequilas, watched her sit on one hip on the couch with her legs crossed and tucked beside her. "This Drunkard wouldn't be a female, would he? La Borracha, maybe?"

"What makes you say that?" Her eyes narrowed and her nostrils flared.

"I can wonder, can't I?" He tossed off his tequila and mixed another without waiting for her.

This was as good a time for a showdown as any; he'd been wanting one for a long time. It isn't healthy to associate with ladies who favor the outgoing party, anyway; they have a habit of dragging a man with them quite against his inclination or will. And Dolores was a cat, a feline, a dangerous person who would sell out Ross Ringler for a better opportunity on a higher plane of life. El Coronel, for instance.

"Adios, Dolores. It's been fun. And if you have a boy, ever, I hope he makes corporal in a better army than the one you've got now."

She uncoiled from the couch and rose to him. "You only think you can leave me."

"I know damned well I can. I'd leave anyone who was a spy for Ventura."

"Haven't you made a mistake?" It was as if in the midst of laughter she had suddenly been lashed across the face.

"Several—which one are you referrin' to?"

She tried to hit him but she didn't. She didn't because he grabbed her swinging arm and twisted it sideward and downward, revolving her around toward the couch. She leaned toward him with the shoulder tension of a famished tigress.

Green-golden fire flashed in her eyes as she asked, "After all I have told you about El Coronel?"

A step sounded behind him and he whirled and was face-to-face with a disheveled, hatless Ventura whose arms were hanging through torn and bloody sleeves. And in that instant Dolores leaped onto his back and tried to blind him with the jagged rim of her broken glass.

Ross snapped his body forward and slung her over his head and into the advancing person of El Coronel. Ventura pitched her aside and went for his gun, and Ross swung a punch like a hayrake and caught El Coronel cleanly on the chin and dumped him flat on the floor, where he bounced once and lay still.

Don Pedro peered in, wild-eyed and panting. "Ah—Ringlair! You are recently from *los Estados Unidos*, no? Then you have not heard—El Borracho assaulted the state's new military headquarters at Boboquivari, and Colonel Ventura barely escaped with his life!"

Ross yanked Don Pedro's hat down over his nose and darted out the door. "Chang! Wake up—chilai, as they say in Chiner! The revolt's damned

near a success, an' it's time we got to hell out of Mexico!"

CHAPTER FIVE

Big Red

SLUGGING through the night toward Cedarbox Canyon, the immensity of time and distance descended on Ross Ringler and once more he felt a slight depression thread through him, not for the future but for the past. He again had a consciousness of living beyond his time, of too many men having passed in his footsteps, leaving him to go on alone without them. Forty-fifty years old only, but he'd fought Phil Sheridan in those years and followed Jeb Stuart across the blood-drenched Peninsula and into Northern Virginia and up to Pennsylvania's shot-raddled meadows.

He'd known Quantrill and he'd shared liquor with Sheriff Pat Garrett and once he'd cut the deck with old Kit Carson for the traveling rights to a Minneconjou squaw—and won. But those were the names of the vanishing West, all gone now with new faces replacing them and himself the only live ghost to haunt their memories.

He knew it was part night, part empty stomach, and part the long horse miles on the long, long trails; but mostly it was the knowledge that if he stayed on the land he'd have to do all those things over again, and too much repetition isn't good for a man's soul. He felt himself tighten up in the guts at the sure knowledge that everything he had come from was gone in the mists of the years behind him.

It is amazing what little residue of his living a man can leave in this world. The memory of his grin in the heart of some woman, long since gone her way with someone else. One man to say, "Ross Ringler was a great gent, but he was awful hard to know—if you ever did get to know him." For the rest—worn clothing, tarnished spurs, two hand guns, and a cantle roll. Fifteen dollars and thirty-one cents cash money, a sack of makings, and a change of socks. And the gotch-eared roan, Joker, with a well-traveled roan's well-worn horse furniture.

His sons, the only true immortality a man can ever have, were scattered to oblivion, if they lived at all. A half-Mex, a half-Comanche; and a girl—there'd been a girl once, Ross had heard. Well, he'd leave some of his spawn on the land, anyway.

His throat was thick and he tried to say "Goddamit" but he was unable to because of the constriction. He wiped roughly at his eyes and spurred ahead of Chang, so that he would not show the emotion that was written on his slowly ageing face.

Ashbow Allen and Henry Prairie Wolf and Doggy Trotwood were waiting in the canyon, three shades from a drama that had been enacted long ago, almost beyond the limits of memory. Of them, only Henry was riding west with the seed stock. Ashbow and Doggy were aiming to trail north again, and follow the melting snows to better lands where you could see for two days in any direction and the horizons had church music in them.

Henry poked at the crumbling fire with a stick and sucked on his pipe a few times before he spoke. "Chang has an idea. He says that in his country, you never really leave home. He says that an old man will be walking along the road, and you will ask him where he is going, and he will reply, 'To my home.' When you ask him when he left it, he will tell you, 'Three hundred years ago,' or 'Five hundred years ago'—whenever his ancestor first left it. But it is always his home, to which someday he will return."

Henry took his pipe from his teeth and stared at Ross. "And so I think I will go with Chang to where my ancestors came from, with wandering generations my only excuse for the delay. The Hunting Ground covers the world, I am told, and it makes not much difference what road you use to enter it."

Nobody wanted any breakfast; it would have been too much like a funeral feast. Ross got the herd started and merely waved at Ashbow and Doggy from the canyon's rim, swallowing hard. Then Chang and Henry circled the drag and Ross led the plodding stock down toward the stockade.

Quintus Rolt knew. In brooding morning weather he stood stiff-legged in front of the gates and heard Ringler out, too respectful of the man's inner turmoil to attempt to rationalize or argue with him.

And then Ross finished with "The revolt's in the bag, an' it looks like Sonora's goin' to have a halfway decent gov'ment—for as long as they want it, anyway."

"You sure the revolt's on target?"

"Pos'tive. Ventura's ragamuffins are about busted apart, an' I hear there may be a rep'sentative election soon."

Major Rolt screwed his eyes up at the darkening skies. "Storm's building. Better be careful."

There was a lightsome streak on the horizon—a streak between the darkness of the sky and the darkness of the land that was so bright that it hurt the eyes as sunlight does when you go out into it from a dim room.

And this, thought Ross Ringler, *is the way to leave, because it's the way I came—in a storm, to spend my life storming.*

Major Rolt repeated, "Better be careful, Big Red."

"I've been told to be careful before, but I always look out for Big Red." Ross tried to smile, but it wan't very good.

Quintus Rolt appraised him with a swift glance. "Have you ever done anything for anyone except yourself?"

"I toss a two-headed coin, I can't lose. . . . S'long, Quint. Write me a letter when you make general. I'll send you a tin star."

"We might meet before that. I'm making a little practice march in the direction of Yuma this week. If I catch El Borracho or any of his men north of The Line, I'll be rough as a cob on 'em. The government of Sonora is still recognized as *de jure* and *de facto* by the United States—even though I personally don't like it."

"Hell, it's so crooked that the leaders' graves'll have to be dug with a corkscrew." Ross saluted from the side of his hat and led west toward the

sounds of thunder, riding with long stirrups and short reins, relaxed yet alert—riding to the sounds of the guns.

It was midafternoon and they were casting for a sheltered camp site when a flurry of musketry came from the south, from across the undefined but known area that was The Line. The thunder had muttered away and died over the distant Pacific, and there was only the stillness of storm-vacuum around them, which made the noises of the trudging herd seem alarmingly loud. And then the musketry again.

Chang and Henry shoved the drag up to prevent a stampede, and Ross spurred Joker out ahead. There was a commotion down to the left, and the persistent rumors of running hoofs. A faint yell sounded, and more firing. The dead gray dust of moistured sand swirled up and flattened away.

A closely bunched group of horsemen galloped into sight, their crossed bandoleers flopping, their bare feet swinging furiously. Then a single rider appeared, hatless and slung alongside his horse's straining neck. His epaulettes and boots were the only bright marks on the whole scene.

Ross yelled to Chang: "Damned nice timing! We ought to get a medal!"

Farther down, more horsemen appeared as if from a mirage, materializing suddenly and growing larger even as Ross looked. And so they came, the first group pursued by the second, each pot-shooting back and forth across the closing distance, firing wildly, yelling insanely.

Colonel Ventura, for once, had been outrun by his command, and he was having a hard time of it staying with them. They were plunging across the wide bareness of The Line without formation or restraint or order, seeking the temporary sanctuary of the soil of the United States. And hard behind them came the spread-out group of eager *insurrectos* with General Rey's trousers flying from a guidon staff, anxious to cut off that escape and demand atonement for years of pillage and thievery and murder and rapine and imprisonment. But the escape was succeeding, was flowing toward the United States side; was entering it, now.

Ross drew both his guns and trotted the length of the herd's restless flank and squeezed off ten shots into the ground, jouncing the near steers into globe-eyed fright. They swung away southward in one smooth motion and broke into a heavy-hoofed run, tails rolling and horns dipping. They bumbled directly into the van of the flying Venturistas and brought it up hard, horses haunch-down, so that the following elements buckled against it. And still did the herd pitch into it, crazed by gunfire and noise. The hurried brass notes of a trumpet sounded from northward.

Then the Venturistas peeled off and raced west to escape the hoofs of the steers and outflank them—only to collide with the riders of El Borracho and be neatly fended, turned and reversed back onto Mexican territory.

Colonel Ventura took a spray of buckshot full in the chest and cartwheeled off his bucking horse and hit the sand dead. The raucous brass file of the trumpet scratched across the

gun-metal of the afternoon and Quint Rolt's practice march came up from a bottom and halted on a rise and watched from the United States side while the red moment of fury spent itself to southward—a long and racing moment of steel on flesh and the livid madness of revenge long-delayed and the black lash-cracks of shots hitting into bones.

They watched decades of misrule collapse in a flung-out tangle of shattered limbs and powder-burned flesh and running horses, and then it was over as quickly as it had begun and there was nothing but the *insurrectos* cheering El Borracho for this last tactic of timing their pursuit to this spot, nothing but El Borracho sitting his roan quietly, chin down and knees loose.

And then he told them: "Go run your own ranch, now; I'm headed for a bigger one across the ocean—if the ship don't sink. I was glad to tell you what to do and when to do it, because I don't like to see little people get pushed around. But I don't envy you for what's ahead, *amigos mio*."

Ross coughed and tried to think of fresh words. Then he remembered something that Chang had once told him about Chinese political philosophy: "You can lose your freedom in a day and not miss it for a century. You've got it now, so don't ever lose it."

He was tired, more tired than he'd been in months. It was indeed a good time to leave—on his laurels, such as they were, for never in his life had he helped so many people at one time; and these people, these cheering *insurrectos*, represented every hovel and hogan in downtrodden Sonora.

He wheeled Joker and faced Major Rolt across the two hundred yards of trampled ground separating them. "Quint, I think I'll stay on this side o' The Line 'til we get the herd dockside at San Diego. That way, you won't have to arrest me."

Rolt didn't have to cup his hands to make himself heard. "I won't arrest you unless I'm ordered to—and I'm senior officer present. I should have suspected you, though, when you kept passing information to that sheepherder and to Jingle Bob for relay to your *insurrectos*."

Ross Ringler waved gaily. "The nicest info' I got was from a girl named Dolores—she was the other side o' my two-headed coin!"

This time, Major Rolt cupped his hands to his mouth because Ringler was already riding west to rejoin the regathered herd: "Where are you going now?"

Ross turned in the saddle, not stopping in his haste to explain to Henry Prairie Wolf why he had not risked including him in the cabal and exposing him to possible arrest.

"Chiner! I'm new High Keeper of the Celestial Steers! An' next time you see a slant-eyed redhead—" His last words were lost in a muffled timpani of thunder.

Quintus Rolt saw a sallow shaft of sunlight creep errantly into the murkiness of the western sky, and he though he saw an immense thumb against a huge nose, wagging four great and impudent fingers—though it might have been an optical illusion, the refraction of the setting sun's rays against the piled-up cloud masses. He never was really sure.

THE END

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A Novelette

Birth of a Texan

By THOMAS THOMPSON

It was a hell of a crew—mostly hide rustlers and horse thieves. But the comradeship of danger made young Ben Weatherby see them in a new light.

CHAPTER ONE

One More Honest Try

THE little camp in the center of the thicket was a chaos of planned destruction. A dozen riders had been here, tearing up everything that was loose. A few cooking utensils were scattered around, shot full of holes; the single tent had been torn to shreds. The pole corral was torn down, the horses gone. Ben Weatherby set his saddle and looked down at it, the anger thick inside him.

"Does this convince you?" his brother asked quietly.

"I'll get another crew and start over," Ben Weatherby said.

His brother Clete dismounted and kicked at a ruined pot. He walked around the camp, a tall, well-built man in his twenties, still wearing a Confederate captain's uniform because he had no other clothes. In time he looked up, his dark, handsome face strained.

"When are you going to quit fighting on the losing side, Ben?"

"These cattle belong to us," Ben Weatherby said stubbornly. "Damned if I'll pay Jake Acton a dollar a head for the privilege of rounding them up and damned if a bunch of

Yanks from Kansas can tell me to move off my own property."

"Quit fooling yourself, Ben," Clete said. "This isn't our property. The old man lost it while we were away. Acton's got the papers to prove it."

"To hell with Acton, too," Ben Weatherby said. "We'll get ourselves another crew. We'll start over."

"Maybe you will, Ben," Clete Weatherby said. "Not me. I like butter on my bread, Ben. The way we used to have it. I fought on the losing side in one war. That's enough."

"That's a hell of a thing to say," Ben said.

"It's the way I feel, Ben," Clete said. "It's the way you ought to feel. There's money to be made if we play it smart. That's the way Dad taught us."

"And Dad winds up broke and drinks himself to death while you and I are out getting shot at. Is that what you want?"

"I want some easy living, Ben," Clete Weatherby said. "I can't get it living out here in the brush like a damn animal." He walked across to his horse and mounted. For a moment he sat there, looking down at his brother, and for a moment there was affection on his handsome face. "Come on, boy," he said softly.

"Where?" Ben asked. He knew the answer. He didn't want to hear it.

"I'm going to work for Jake Acton," Clete said.

"Clete, use your head. Jake is a damn carpetbagger."

"Jake is the head man around here now, just like our dad used to be," Clete Weatherby said. "I like associating with the head man." The faint smile died and Clete's eyes were hard. "Forget this mavericking, Ben," he said. "You keep it up and you and me will run into each other head on. We've been brothers too long to let that happen."

He reined his horse and sank his spurs and the deep gloom of the thicket closed in behind him. For a long time Ben Weatherby stood there, looking at the chaos around him. Then slowly he started straightening things up.

He was up before daylight the next morning, a quick moving man, tall and lean, as blond as a Viking. His skin was weathered, his eyes a bright blue. He didn't bother to build a fire because there was nothing to cook. For just a moment he thought of Clete, wavering a second. Ben Weatherby too remembered the old days before the war; there was no sense telling himself he didn't. It was pleasant to have everything you wanted—

The sun was over the rim of the prairie when he rode out of the brush and looked across the long valley that had once been Weatherby range. Nearly a thousand wild longhorns were being held there now, gathered from the thickets by a hardcase crew hired by a Yankee buyer whom Ben had never met. He didn't go out of his way to meet Yankees. He had met most of the crew, however, for they were men who had lived around here before the war, men who had lived off Weatherby beef, hating the name of Weatherby because it meant power. He thought of Garth Trapper, the foreman, and he wondered how much of this raid had been ordered by the

Yank buyer, how much had been ordered by Jake Acton, and how much had originated in the bull-like brain of Garth Trapper. He meant to find out.

He skirted the cattle camp, not wanting to run into almost certain trouble, and he took the ridge trail that led to the old Weatherby home place. The buildings were pink with new sun as he rode up the familiar poplar-lined lane toward the house where he had been born and raised. Jake Acton owned that house now, just as Jake Acton owned everything else around here. The Yankee cattle buyer was living there while he rounded up what had once been Weatherby cattle.

It was strange coming home like this, knowing it was not home any more. A deep depression seized Ben and clung to him and he rode slowly, seeing all the familiar things, all of them strange to him now. He thought of Jake Acton, a man who had grown big during the war, and he tried to think of his own father bowing down to Jake Acton, finally cracking under the pressure of a fortune in Confederate money that was worthless. Jake Acton had known the right people. He had known how to get Yankee dollars, and it didn't take many Yankee dollars to buy up half of Texas the way things were. Damn it to hell, maybe Clete was right. Maybe a man ought to get on the gravy train.

He reined into the yard and dismounted in front of the porch. For a long while he stood there, looking at a yellow rose his mother had planted, inhaling the familiar scent of honeysuckle just starting to bloom. He didn't hear the door open and he didn't see the girl come out on the porch. She stood there looking at him, a tall girl with dark hair and dark eyes and creamy white skin. In time she said, "You seem to like flowers."

He turned, startled, and a deep crimson crawled up his neck and spread across his cheeks. He could never control a blush and it always angered him. The girl saw his discomfort and smiled. "I'm Betty Dean," she said. "I suppose you came to see my brother about work?"

"No," he said. "I didn't. My name's Weatherby. I've been working cows in the thickets."

The smile left her face immediately. He saw her shoulders stiffen, her chin lift. "I can understand how you might feel you still have rights here, Mr. Weatherby," she said, "but I can't condone your methods." She turned and would have gone back into the house but he stepped forward and took her arm.

She turned swiftly, a quick anger in her, and she tried to pull away from his grasp. "I don't know what you've heard about me, Miss Dean," he said, "and I don't happen to give a hoot. Beyond that I don't discuss my business with women. Is your brother here?"

This time she did jerk free of his grasp. She moved swiftly to the end of the porch and called sharply. Over by the barn two men dropped their work and came running.

"Mr. Weatherby here is molesting me, boys," she said deliberately.

Ben looked at the men and saw the familiar blue shirts of Yankee infantrymen. Both men were big and young;

both looked at Ben with unmasked pleasure. "I figured maybe our little raid would stir up a hornet or two, didn't you, Ralph?" one said.

"Where's your brother, Reb?" the one called Ralph said. "I wanted to get my hands on both of you at once." They started moving toward the porch, cautious now, both men ready, both watching Ben's gun.

"You better think twice, Yanks," Ben said.

He was still on the porch, above them. The girl had moved back against the wall and she stood there, her hand on her throat. She looked suddenly as if she were sorry she had started this and then her lips tightened. "You asked for this, Mr. Weatherby," she said. The man called Ralph suddenly vaulted up onto the porch and came at Ben with a headlong charge. Ben caught him with a straight arm but now the other man was on the porch and they closed in on him.

They knew how to fight, these Yankees, and they had no qualms about letting the odds be two to one. Ben felt his head rock back; he saw stars; he felt a fist against his mouth, mashing his lips. He fought, but they were too much for him and his knees sagged. One man caught him under the arms and held him, the other braced his feet and he saw the man's face, close. And suddenly a third man was there, pushing his way through, giving orders. The fight stopped, but one of the Yankees held Ben helpless.

"This is one of those Weatherbys that's been driving off our gathers," Ralph said.

"Turn him loose," the older man said, and there was authority in his voice.

They released Ben and stood there and gradually Ben's senses cleared. He saw the girl, white-faced now, and he got a good look at the man who had stopped the fight.

There was a strong resemblance between the man and girl—a stubborn arrogance that might have been a cover-up for worry. The man said, "I'm Matthew Dean, and if you had come to me in the first place this trouble wouldn't have started. I've got a contract to deliver two thousand cattle to Kansas. I'm paying Jake Acton a dollar a head for the privilege of rounding them up in this area. I won't stand for you or any other man driving off bunches of them after my men have gone to the work of rounding them up. Is that clear?"

"Sorry," Ben said. "It's not. Jake Acton hasn't got any right to make deals with my cattle."

"I wasn't aware that they were your cattle," Matthew Dean said.

"You are now," Ben said.

"Not at all," Matthew Dean said. "I have seen legal evidence that Jake Acton has the right to do what he pleases with this ranch and the cattle that are on it. You Rebels never do learn when you're whipped, do you?"

"I reckon we don't," Ben said. "And the next time you raid my camp, why not come along yourself?"

"I don't need to," Matthew Dean said. "I can hire my fighting done."

The Yankee arrogance, the unfair beating, the way the girl had ordered it, all these things exploded and mixed with the worry that had been in Ben Weatherby for months. He took one step forward, lashed out with a short

right and saw Matthew Dean fall full length.

"Hire somebody to pick you up, then," Ben said. His hand dropped and came up with a gun. He looked straight at the girl. "And as long as you're calling the odds, I'll use this gun to even them up. When your loud-mouthed brother can talk again, tell him to stay away from me."

He backed off the porch and mounted his horse and as he rode down the lane at a full run his temper started cooling.

It hadn't been the way to handle this, he knew. Clete would have been a lot smoother with it. They probably could have worked out a simple agreement with the Yankee. But it was done now. He headed for the brush country along the river, back where he had started a month ago, no crew, no money, just a wild idea that these cattle still belonged to him, a wilder idea that he could round up a thousand or so and deliver them to Kansas.

But a month ago his brother Clete had been with him and the dream had been easy. He glanced back at the old home place and the small thread of his determination nearly parted. Why did a man knock himself out when it would be so easy to play it Jake Acton's way? One more try, he decided. One more honest try, and then if it didn't work he would go crawling to Jake Acton and admit he was whipped. He'd crawl to Jake Acton and beg for a job, just as Clete had done, and if the job meant hiring his gun or burning down barns, that would have to be all right. The heaviness grew inside him.

CHAPTER TWO

A Hell of a Crew

IT WAS a hell of a crew he finally rounded up. He took them because he could do no better, admitting to them that he could neither feed them nor pay them, selling them only a dream. He talked to them there in the thicket, Daniel Boone Grayson, the one-eyed hide rustler, Wesley Gutterbien, who had served with Quantrill; Sam Houston Bates, an old-timer, a horse trader whose mares managed to have ten colts each a year. And the Mexican who called himself Alberto Carrillo and winked when he said it.

Of the four, this Carrillo was the only one Ben hadn't known for a long time. Like his former crew, these others were men who had hated the name of Weatherby. They hadn't changed, but their bellies were empty, they hated Jake Acton, and the Yankee was afraid to hire them. Old one-eyed Daniel was the spokesman.

"All right, Ben," he said, "we might give it a try. Three of us here figure the Weatherbys owe us something. You say we'll be equal partners. If you don't mean it, there's enough of us here to deal you out."

"I don't admit the Weatherbys owe you anything," Ben said flatly. "If I was to collect for all the beef you've stolen from my dad in the past twenty years I wouldn't have to make a cattle drive."

Little Alberto, a fat, round, brown man with a twinkling smile, took a knife from his belt and tested the point on the ball of his thumb. "You are a first-class liar, senor," he said pleasantly. "I have never stolen a cow

from the Weatherbys. I have always done my stealing fifty miles west and south of here."

"I apologize," Ben said. He went back to his proposition. "Any cows the Yanks have got rounded up we'll leave alone," he said. "We'll expect them to do the same for us. If they don't, we'll have to play it careful. There's ten of them to one of us."

"How about Jake Acton?" old Daniel said, wiping moisture from his blind eye. "He say you could work these thickets?"

"I didn't ask him," Ben said, "but if I had asked him he might have said no. He figures he owns all of Texas all of a sudden and he charges a dollar a head for every cow that leaves the state. I haven't got a dollar, but I figure on taking a thousand head up the trail. Does that answer your question?"

"It does," old Daniel said. "Sooner or later we run afoul of Jake Acton, and that's all right with me." He chewed thoughtfully. "What do you think, boys?"

Wesley Gutterbien, a shifty-eyed hawk-faced man, grinned. "Only one reason I'm going along," he said. "I want to see how a Weatherby holds up under the same kind of medicine they used to dish out."

Sam Houston Bates stared steadily at Ben. He was an old man with a white beard. "Where's your brother Clete come into this?" he asked quietly.

He might as well tell them, Ben knew. They'd find out sooner or later and there was no use lying to an outfit like this. "Clete's working for Jake Acton," he said. "He doesn't come into it."

A quick silence ran around the camp and the men glanced at each other. "I never liked Weatherbys, Ben," old Daniel said finally. "I liked Clete least of all. Don't expect me to hold back because he's your brother."

This was the place to stop it. This was the place to call the whole deal off. To hell with it. Go on and join up with Clete. Live fat off the poverty of Texas. Rub noses with the State Police and the Yankee bosses and the carpetbaggers. Live like a gentleman and to hell with four years of war and the future of Texas—

Ben's lips pulled into a tight line. "You're in business with me," he said flatly, and he had to force the words. "Clete can take care of himself."

Alberto Carrillo, the little Mexican, toyed with his knife. There was a softness in his voice. "I don't know you pretty good, Senor Ben," he said, "but I knew another fellow once. He had to kill his brother. It made him feel pretty bad."

"You've heard the proposition," Ben said.

"We'll try it," old Daniel said. "Maybe even a Weatherby can be changed by an empty belly."

For the next two days there was a definite sparring around between Ben and the crew, a sizing up with too many memories of the old days when the Weatherbys had ruled this country with guns, giving no quarter. It wasn't a thing to be forgotten easily and the constant knowledge that Clete Weatherby didn't share his brother's avowed change of heart didn't help matters. Only Alberto Carrillo seemed unaffected by it all.

In the evenings the little Mexican would sit with his back to a tree, a drawn pistol in his lap, a battered old guitar looped around his neck by a greasy rawhide thong. He would sing softly, his eyes half closed as if his mind were a million miles away, but when anyone moved those eyes would flick open and the right hand, strumming the guitar strings, would drop instantly to the pistol. He never complained, never offered an explanation. He worked hard, preferring to keep in the thickets, letting the other men work out in the open. There was someone on his trail, Ben knew, but he didn't ask about it.

The evening of the third day just as the men were rounding up the small gather they had made, an old ladino decided he didn't like the new order of things. Catching old Daniel momentarily on foot he made a wild, head-down charge. Ben was about twenty feet away. He spurred his horse, tried to head the bull, and, seeing that he couldn't do it, threw himself from the saddle and got the big fellow by the horns. Digging his heels, Ben hung on, but he had too much bull. The big speckled mossyhorn kept right on going taking Ben with him.

It took seconds, but in those seconds a lot of things happened. Old Sam Houston Bates got a rope around the bull's hind feet; Wesley Gutterbien rode in and snatched Daniel off the ground and got him up behind him. And Alberto Carrillo, prancing like a bull fighter, came in waving his arms, slapping his sides until the confused bull divided his attention between Ben, hanging onto his horns, and the crazy Mexican who seemed to be inviting death. He made a side charge at Carrillo and the Mexican's short catch rope flicked at those front feet. Before he knew what hit him the big fellow was stretched out front and back and five men stood there grinning at each other, the comradeship of danger between them.

Ben looked at his crew and suddenly they weren't hide rustlers and horse thieves any more. They were Texans, just like himself, and he wasn't one damn bit better than the rest of them when it came right down to things that counted. The minute he admitted that he felt better and it was something he had been wanting to admit for a long time. It was the difference, he knew, between himself and Clete—He punched the Mexican in the ribs. "Pretty fancy dancing," he said.

"Once I used to fight the bull," Alberto said, shrugging.

"Now you sling the bull, eh?" Wesley said. Five men, still a little bashful, made light, insulting remarks, the first sign of friendship.

They finished putting the gather into the brush pen they had made and rode back to camp, pretending deep seriousness now. "Sure be glad when we get to Kansas," old Daniel said. "Gonna drink a little whisky if they got enough for me."

"How much you need, Daniel?" Ben asked.

"Forty, fifty gallon ought to do for a dust chaser," Daniel said.

"I'm giving a party when we get to Kansas," Ben said. "I figured about fifty gallons apiece."

"Hope that ain't the same night I

give my party," Wesley Gutterbien said. "I'd hate to do you out of your whisky, Ben."

"You have a party?" Sam Houston Bates snorted. "Who in hell would associate with you?"

Alberto Carrillo grinned. "In heaven or in hell, what is the difference? We are all partners, no? I will go to your party, Senor Sam Houston."

"All right, Mex," Sam Houston said. "We'll drink it all our own selves."

"I cannot enjoy drinking unless I am drinking with my good friends," the Mexican said.

"Neither can I, boys," Ben Weatherby said, a sudden tightening in his throat. "I reckon we're all gonna have to get drunk together."

And all of sudden, Ben Weatherby knew, a new Texas was being born. The old order didn't exist any more, the sharp class divisions. Texas was broke but Texas wasn't whipped. Texas would gather what it had and start over and it couldn't be choosy about a man's past.

A man had to earn his right to live, and the Weatherbys hadn't done that for a long time. Clete and Ben had bought their commissions into the army. They had bought their way into everything and given nothing in return. You had to give before you could take—That, he knew, was the thing Clete hadn't yet learned. He reined up suddenly, hearing the approaching riders, and he felt the sudden caution come into the crew. A man and a woman rode out of the thicket and into the clearing. It was Clete and the Yankee girl, Betty Dean.

CHAPTER THREE

Ambassador of Good Will

CLETE Weatherby looked like a million dollars. He had gotten rid of the faded Confederate uniform and was completely outfitted with new clothes from head to foot. He had shaved and he had a fresh hair cut; the moodiness was gone from his eyes, the slump from his shoulders. He rode close to the girl and all the old confidence Ben knew so well was in his brother. Ben glanced at his crew and saw that Carrillo had ridden out of sight into the brush. The rest of the men sat there, expectant.

"Something on your mind, Clete?" Ben asked quietly.

"Figured you could use some supplies, for one thing," Clete said. He jerked a thumb toward two sacks tied behind his saddle. He grinned at his brother. "Betty here wanted to talk to you."

"I talked to her a few days back," Ben said tightly. "She bring her bodyguard with her?"

"I told you my brother had a hard head," Clete drawled. He dismounted and started untying the sacks.

"If the supplies came from Jake Acton," Ben said, "we don't want 'em. There'd be too many strings attached."

"They didn't come from Jake Acton," the girl said. "They came from me and my brother." Her chin was up but she couldn't seem to keep her lips as firm as she wanted.

"Matthew Dean and his sister here figure it's a waste of time for you and them to keep fighting," Clete said. "They figure the supplies will sort of

pay for the way they ripped up your camp."

"You mean I scared 'em out just by calling on them once?" Ben asked.

The girl didn't speak to Ben. She spoke to Clete. "Your brother not only has a hard head," she said, "he is also about as conceited an ass as I've ever met. Doesn't he realize that if my brother and I wanted to we could drive him out of the country?"

"Then why don't she and her brother try it?" Ben asked. He too spoke to Clete, but his eyes kept drifting to the girl, seeing the soft swell of her breasts, the creamy whiteness of her throat. "Is it because we've rounded up near five hundred head in spite of them?"

"If your brother doesn't realize that some people might be motivated by fair play," the girl said, "there's little use in telling him."

Clete Weatherby laughed. "Why don't you two get down and slug it out?" he asked.

"Maybe she's like her brother," Ben said. "Her brother hires his fighting done. He told me so."

"Now look, Ben," Clete said, suddenly serious. "I know you've got your back up. You and Matthew Dean have run afoul of each other a couple of times so you both had your mind made up that there was going to be a big fight. As soon as I had a chance to talk to Matthew and Betty here we all saw there was nothing to fight about. The Deans have got to deliver two thousand head north and they have to get started right away. They need help."

"I figured there'd be a joker in the hole," Ben said. He motioned to his crew with a jerk of his head. "Come on, boys."

The girl rode her horse directly in front of Ben and dismounted and now she was mad. "All right," she said, "go ahead. I might have known there'd be no getting along with you. How two brothers could be so different I'll never know, but I will tell you that you don't deserve to have a brother like Clete. All he was thinking about was helping you out and this is the kind of appreciation you show. I wish our two men had beaten your head off!"

"You see why I'm about to fall in love with her?" Clete said, grinning. "I like that fire!"

Betty Dean's face turned scarlet, but not from any anger with Clete. As a matter of fact, she half turned toward him and he put a protective arm around her waist. Ben looked at them standing there and got a little weak spot in the pit of his stomach.

"All right," he mumbled. "Guess I was being a little hard headed at that."

Clete's arm tightened around Betty Dean's waist. "Maybe the deal's off," he said. "I'll have to ask my boss."

"Your boss?" Ben said.

"Sure," Clete said easily. "Betty here. I'm working for the Deans."

"I thought—"

"I was working for Jake Acton?" Clete shrugged. "Maybe you don't know me as well as you thought you did, Ben."

Ben felt a quick surge of hope that made him realize just how worried he had been about Clete. He grinned. "All right, Miss Dean," he said. "I apologize and I'll listen."

It took about a half hour for Betty

Dean to calm down enough to tell Ben the proposition. But during that half hour she got a fire going and decided that as long as she was here she might as well do some cooking. Watching her hurry around the fire, brushing a wisp of hair off her forehead now and then, banging the lid on the new Dutch oven she had brought along. Ben got to dreaming all sorts of dreams. And then he would glance at Clete, sitting there against a tree, grinning like a contented cat, and the dreams would die.

But if Betty Dean was here as an ambassador of good will, her brother Matthew had certainly sent the right ambassador. Old Daniel chopped wood and hopped around like a crow; Wesley Gutterbien gallantly braved smoke and a scorched hand to retrieve a kettle lid from the fire; Alberto Carrillo, after a careful appraisal of the visitors from the protection of the brush, came on into camp, got his guitar, and sang like a bird, Sam Houston Bates even washed his face.

The supper was wonderful and the contentment that settled across the camp was a thing that could be felt. It even touched Betty Dean and she forgot to speak to Ben through his brother and once when Ben's eyes met her eyes he had a wild, uncontrollable feeling that he was saying to her. *Don't you see we were made for each other*?

He saw the startled look in her eyes, almost as if she had understood his unspoken question, and then she came and sat by Clete and Clete took her hand and held it.

"You help us and we'll help you," Betty Dean said. "We have a time clause in our contract and we aren't going to make it. Help us out and we'll pool what cattle you have with our herd and pick up as many more as we can. When we get to Kansas, one thousand head are yours to do with as you please."

"How about Jake Acton?" Ben asked quietly. "I told him I wouldn't pay him a dollar a head for cattle I figured were my own."

"Regardless of your personal feelings," Betty said, "Jake Acton is a business man. Unless we stop this fighting and work together Matthew and I might as well give up the entire deal. Jake Acton would rather have two thousand dollars than nothing. He has offered to let you take a thousand head free with the understanding that you will sign an agreement that you have no other right to cattle on this range."

"It's all we ever asked, Ben," Clete said quietly.

And it was. Ben had figured his father had sold out too cheap, but he was honest enough to admit that the deal had certainly been legal. Jake Acton was going a long way to be fair. Knowing Jake Acton, he was going a little too far. It wasn't like him—

"It's up to the boys here," Ben said. "We're in this together."

"Why don't you take a vote?" Betty Dean suggested.

There would have been one dissenting vote—Ben's own. He shrugged his shoulders and said, "We'll join you in the morning then."

The girl offered her hand and Ben took it, finding it hard to release it, and as Betty and Clete rode off into the darkness he felt a great emptiness growing inside him. The soft voice of

Alberto Carrillo, close to his elbow, said:

"It is very bad when two brothers start looking at the same girl."

"You're mighty free with your advice, Carrillo," Ben snapped.

"Why not?" the little Mexican said. "When a man learns something it is no good if he does not tell it to his friends. When a man keeps everything inside it grows and gets big and makes a man sick." He strummed the guitar softly. "Tell me about Jake Acton," he said quietly.

"He was a storekeeper before the war," Ben said, surprised to find that he wanted to talk about Jake Acton more than anything else. "He was a Union sympathizer and he must have known the right people. He got hold of some money—"

"The rest I can guess," Alberto said. "Your father was the king here. Jake Acton wanted to be king, too, but he never could. Now he is king."

"That's right," Ben said.

"Such a man does not give away a thousand head of cattle," Alberto said softly. "Such a man has big hates. Such a man would find ways to destroy all the relatives of the former king."

"That's what I was thinking, Alberto," Ben said.

"I know," Alberto said. "It is not good to think such things alone."

"Will you ride into town with me, Alberto?" Ben asked.

Alberto shook his head. "No."

"Afraid of seeing somebody?"

"I am afraid of no one," Alberto said. "But if a man's life is a small handful of sand he watches that sand carefully. It is for him alone to say when he should open his hand and let the sand fall out."

"Anything you want to tell me, Alberto?" Ben asked quickly.

"I have already told you, *amigo*," Alberto said. "It has been good to talk. Go ahead now and talk with your brother. You will feel better."

CHAPTER FOUR

Double Double-Cross

BEN remembered Jake Acton as a nervous man, a storekeeper who had never been successful, a weasel of a man with a whine in his voice. The man behind the desk was Jake Acton, all right, but the war had changed him as much as it had changed Texas itself. His voice was firm and sure, his gaze steady. He reassembled the papers on his desk.

"Good to see you, Ben. Something I can do for you?"

"I'm looking for Clete," Ben said. "I stopped by the old home place and Matthew Dean told me Clete had come here."

Jake Acton hooked thumbs in the arm holes of his vest and teetered back in his chair, a man who was big and was constantly trying to find some way to show it. "I take it then you've talked to the Deans about my proposition?"

"I have," Ben said. "I haven't figured out yet why you make it."

"Just good business," Jake Acton said. He reached forward suddenly and opened a humidor. "Cigar?"

"No," Ben said.

Acton took his time about clipping and lighting his own cigar. He got it

going and blew smoke toward the ceiling. "You ought to understand business, Ben," he said. "You Weatherbys ran things around here long enough. If your father saw a chance to make a dollar he made it, didn't he?" Acton laughed. "Unfortunately, they were Confederate dollars, but then, he didn't know you boys were going to lose the war. I could have told him—"

"If my dad had me in the spot you've got me in he wouldn't have given me a thousand cows," Ben said. "He'd have made me fight my way out. I've figured right along that was what you'd do."

"Your dad made a lot of enemies with tactics like that," Jake Acton said. He leaned forward suddenly, his eyes bright. "Texas is going to grow, Ben," he said. "The men who are in on the ground floor are going to grow with it, provided they've got friends. My game is politics, Ben. Big politics." He smiled expansively. "A little good will is worth more to me than the few dollars you and I are arguing about. Anything wrong with that reasoning, Ben?"

"Only one thing," Ben Weatherby said. "A man like you isn't satisfied with that slow a deal. A man like you wants it all in one lump. What's that card up your sleeve look like, Jake?"

Jake Acton's eyes turned hard behind his square glasses. He leaned forward, his upper lip pulled away from his prominent teeth in what was supposed to be a smile. "Don't ask questions, Ben," Jake said levelly. "Just listen to what I say. The Weatherbys aren't running this country any more. Jake Acton is. You'll have to learn that. Clete already has. You'll find him over at the hotel."

He smiled widely and that smile was like a knife between the shoulder blades as Ben Weatherby walked out of the office and through the deserted general-merchandise store. Why not leave well enough alone, he kept asking himself. And the answer was there in that cold smile of Jake Acton's. You couldn't leave well enough alone because Jake Acton was right. There was only his way. And Jake Acton's way, regardless of what Clete thought, wouldn't include the Weatherby brothers. He entered the hotel and didn't notice the two men in the lobby until they started to follow him up the stairs. He recognized them immediately. "You looking for me?" he asked.

Both men shrugged and the thickset one with the black beard said, "You think you own these stairs, maybe?"

Ben looked at Garth Trapper, the man who was presently working as round-up captain for Matthew Dean. He remembered the countless times he had tangled with Garth before the war and he remembered the public whipping Colonel Weatherby had given this man for horse stealing. Ben grinned.

"It's a free country," he said.

"First time I ever heard a Weatherby admit it," Garth said. "Ain't that so, Jay Dee?"

"Ain't you heard?" Jay Dee said. "The Weatherby boys is sweet as hell all of a sudden. They'll talk to practically anybody."

"The devil you say!" Garth Trapper said. "You reckon they'd talk to plain trash like us?"

"We can find out," Jay Dee said. "We was gonna see brother Clete anyway. Now here's brother Ben."

"Maybe the Weatherby boys will tell us the old days was all a mistake," Garth Trapper said. "Maybe they want to be friends and tell us we can ride Weatherby range all we want. You suppose that's it?"

Jay Dee's long horse face had a wicked grin and his eyes were alive with old hatreds. "It won't be much of an offer, will it?" he said. "They ain't got nothin' left." He was standing close to Ben, his face thrust out, inviting trouble. "How's it feel to be down and out?"

"If I'm ever down and out, I'll let you know," Ben said. He pushed away from the two men and walked rapidly down the hall toward his brother's room. The door opened immediately at his knock and Clete stood there, a glass in his hand, surprise on his face.

"Ben!" Clete said. "I was expecting—"

"Garth and Jay Dee?" Ben said. "They're right here behind me."

"Ben," Clete fumbled, "could you come back a little later? I've got some—"

"Let him stay." Garth Trapper's voice was heavy. He gave Ben a shove, pushing him on into the room, and Jay Dee came inside, closed the door and leaned against it. Jay Dee took a knife from his belt and started scraping the backs of his nails. Garth Trapper stood there flat-footed, his hand on his gun.

"All right," he said. "Start talking, Clete. We've done our job. Why haven't you done yours?"

Clete Weatherby was starting to perspire. Ben looked at his brother, seeing that weak mouth—the luxury-loving mouth. "I just wanted to talk over tomorrow's gather," Clete said.

Garth Trapper's eyes widened a bit. He glanced at Clete and then at Ben. "Is your big brother in on this?" he asked flatly.

"In on what, Clete?" Ben asked quietly.

"It's nothing, Ben," Clete said. He downed his drink. "I told you the proposition this afternoon."

"He's in on it now," Garth Trapper said.

"Look, boys," Clete said. "Let's all go have a drink. Too damn hot to talk business anyway."

"What's the matter, Clete?" Jay Dee said. "Did you turn yellow?"

"I figured he would," Garth said.

"Yeah," Jay Dee said. "I figured that too. He talks big, but when it comes to getting a little blood on his hands he starts crawlin'. We got rid of Matthew Dean tonight. That's our part of the bargain. You was supposed to get rid of Jake Acton, but he's still alive. What's the matter, Clete? Is Jake too big for you?"

Garth Trapper drew his gun slowly. "I reckon Jake is," he said, "so I guess we better keep stringin' along with Jake Acton. We been gettin' paid. It ain't the big deal Clete here offered us, but it looks like Jake is still the big man."

"Wait a minute, boys," Clete said. His face had turned white and his hands were shaking. "It still goes. We'll be partners, the three of us. You won't get any place working for Jake. We'll get rid of him and take over the whole thing!"

Garth Trapper started to laugh, a

deep, sadistic sound. "I always did figure the Weatherbys was way overrated," he said. "I always figured if you could get one out in the light where you could look at him you'd find a damn fool. I was right."

He cocked his gun and now Jay Dee had drawn his. Ben looked at the two men, so sure of themselves.

"Let's talk this over, Garth!" Clete said.

"Did you think you was foolin' Jake Acton?" Garth said. "Hell, he knew every move you was making. All that talk of yours how you could make the girl fall in love with you and get the Yank off guard. Me and Jay Dee and Jake had a good laugh about that, just like we did about us three being partners."

"Why you dirty double-crossing—" Clete started.

"Ain't that kinda funny, comin' from you?" Garth said.

"We're wastin' time, Garth," Jay Dee said.

"You know, boys," Garth said mildly, "we're gettin' a hundred dollars apiece for gettin' rid of you. I bet you figgered you was worth more than that."

Ben looked at his brother and felt sick to his stomach. Clete was backed against the wall, his hand at his throat, the perspiration thick on his face.

"Don't do it, boys," he pleaded. "We can still be partners. I'll get rid of Jake, just like I said I would. I'll work for you two, just for wages."

Ben Weatherby felt like he was crying inside, and then over that came fear and self-preservation and mingled with those emotions was the tug of the blood tie. He inched to one side and saw Garth's finger tighten against the trigger. The lamp was only inches from his hand. He took a deep breath, then threw himself full length toward the lamp. The shattering crash of glass was drowned out by the roar of the two six-shooters.

CHAPTER FIVE

"I Like Butter on my Bread."

HE HAD gained a second, Ben knew, and no more. In that second he jerked his gun free of its holster and fired point-blank at the stabs of flame that still winked as a memory in his eyes. A gun glared back at him and the numbing shock of lead crashed against him, beating him to the floor. Over in the darkness of a corner Clete Weatherby was sobbing.

There was a thunder of boots in the hall now, the shouting of men, and from the street came the scream of a woman and the wild clatter of a runaway horse and buggy. There was a hammering on the door, a dinning thunder as Garth and Jay Dee emptied their six-shooters into the darkness, then a splintering crash as the door gave way, a savage grunt of pain, and the calm voice of Alberto Carrillo saying:

"I am glad today I sharpen my knife."

"Careful with your guns, boys," old Daniel's voice warned. "Ben's in there someplace."

Jay Dee was cursing steadily and Wesley Gutterbien kept murmuring, "Be quiet, Jay Dee." A man moved through the darkness.

"Ben?"

"Here, Sam Houston," Ben called, still afraid to move. "It was Garth and Jay Dee."

"If that's all, we can get a light," Sam Houston Bates said. The timid voice of the hotel clerk offered to get a lamp.

The yellow glare of the approaching lamp spilled through the open door, throwing shadows across the strained faces of Ben Weatherby's crew. Clete was huddled in a far corner and at first, even before realizing his own wound, Ben thought his brother had been hit. He got to his feet and started across the room, the sudden dizziness claiming him, and he saw Clete straighten and stand there, his eyes staring with terror, and then the terror retreated and the old arrogance slowly claimed Clete's features. He glanced at Ben, saw the accusation in Ben's eyes, and covered it with the old self-assurance that was so much a part of him.

"Give me a gun," he said. "I'll finish this thing." He stooped down and picked up the gun Garth Trapper had dropped and pushed through the doorway.

"Wait a minute, Clete," Ben said quietly. Blood was running down Ben's arm, dripping from his finger tips. The bullet had gone through the flesh above his left armpit.

Clete turned, the gun in his hand now, the gun alone giving him the strength he had never really had. "You want Jake Acton out of the way, don't you?" he said.

"Not if you plan to take his place." Ben said quietly.

"You want to try to stop me?" Clete asked.

Old Daniel's hand moved toward his holster and Alberto Carrillo, the Mexican, stepped in, gripping Daniel's arm. "The men are brothers," Alberto said quietly. "It is their business."

For a long moment Ben and Clete Weatherby looked at each other, knowing that anything that had been between them was gone, and then Clete turned and went down the hall and they heard him crossing the lobby.

"Here, Ben," Wesley Gutterbien said. "Let me tie up that arm."

Ben winced against pain and the thought that kept running through his mind was that men who had once hated him had saved his life. "Glad you boys showed up," he said simply.

"The Mex told us where you went," Wesley said. "Didn't figger you had the right to make any deals without us. We're supposed to be partners." His voice was gruff, a man who was trying to conceal the fact that he had been worried about the welfare of another man.

"We went over to Matthew Dean's camp first," Wesley went on. He used his teeth to tie the knot in the bandage. "There was hell to pay over there. Garth and Jay Dee walked out and took half the crew with them. That damn Yankee Matthew Dean tried to stop 'em—"

"The girl all right?" Ben asked.

"As all right as she could be with her brother shot full of holes," Wesley said. He stood back suddenly, his eyes as hard as flint. "Me and the boys here talked it over," he said suddenly. "We're gonna go ahead with the deal we made with her.

We're helping her take that herd north. You can come along or drop out, whatever you want."

Ben felt a welling admiration that he had trouble concealing and along with it came the certain knowledge that this was the showdown. He said, "If she's lost half her crew we won't have a chance to make up much of a herd of our own—"

"I said you could come along or drop out," Gutterbien said. "Nobody's beggin' yuh. You're only half a man anyway, with that crippled wing."

"I reckon I'll come along," Ben said. He turned to hide the emotion in his eyes. A week ago he had reluctantly accepted this crew because it was the best he could do. Now he wouldn't have traded them for any outfit on earth—"Let's go," he said. "We might have to reason with Jake Acton." He purposely avoided any mention of Clete. He was clinging to the thread of hope that Clete might put in with him, a thread so fragile that even open discussion might break it. The men seemed to sense his feelings. It was as if Clete Weatherby didn't exist— They started down the hall together and the sound of a single shot interrupted the startled stillness that had settled across the town.

They came out of the hotel in a group, Ben Weatherby and his crew, and there across the street the lights were ablaze in Jake Acton's store. A dozen men were running amok inside that building, tearing merchandise from the shelves, yelling, cursing. There in the doorway, a drawn gun in his hand, Ben saw his brother Clete.

Ben's crew stepped off the sidewalk and Ben said quietly, "Wait here." They stopped, to a man.

With his gun in its holster, his left arm in a sling, Ben Weatherby walked slowly across the street, seeing the widening grin of his brother. When he was at the edge of the sidewalk he stopped. "Ready to fight on the winning side for a change, Ben?" Clete Weatherby asked.

"You figure you're on it?" Ben asked.

"I just killed Jake Acton," Clete said without any trace of emotion. He jerked his head toward the interior of the store. "That's my army in there. They're doing a little looting. Remember how the Yanks used to loot, Ben? Makes for a happy army."

"I'm putting in with Betty Dean, Clete," Ben said. "We're taking that herd north."

"That so?" Clete said.

"She's not paying you any dollar a head. Neither am I."

"That's all right," Clete said. "You're my big brother. I wouldn't want to charge you." His grin widened. "Especially not when that's gonna be my herd."

"No, Clete," Ben said.

"I told you, Ben," Clete said softly. "I like butter on my bread. I like the girl, too. I mean to have both."

"No, Clete."

For just a second a wash of old memories and old affections and old alliances crossed Clete Weatherby's eyes. It touched his voice.

"Come with me, Ben," he said. "We'll run Texas! Go back and tell those renegades of yours to come on over and help themselves to anything in Jake Acton's store. Tell them

there'll be more of the same if they string along with the Weatherby brothers."

Ben Weatherby looked at his brother. He took a long look, wanting to remember. Then he turned and walked back to his waiting crew.

"If you want to join up with Clete," he said, "you can go help yourself to anything in the store. He plans on taking over the Dean girl's herd and I guess he's big enough to do it. A man that strings along with him might make out all right."

"Get the horses, boys," old Daniel said.

"Did you hear what I said?" Ben asked.

"We better get back to camp," Wesley Gutterbien said. "We want to get the herd on the trail soon's we can. Time's running short."

They got their horses and momentarily they turned in their saddles and glanced at Ben, then they turned their backs, telling him any decision he wanted to make was his own. Only Alberto Carrillo lingered behind. He looked at Ben and there was sadness in the little Mexican's eyes.

"*Si*, Senor Ben," he said. "Time is running very short."

Ben Weatherby mounted and rode out of town with the Mexican beside him. He knew Clete's gun was trained on his back, but he knew Clete wouldn't pull the trigger. He didn't know how he knew, but he knew it certainly. Sweat ran down the creases in Ben Weatherby's face and was salty at the corners of his mouth.

You can't pull that trigger, Clete, he said to himself. *Will I be able to when the time comes*?

CHAPTER SIX

Texas Trail Boss

THE girl stood in the awakening dawn, her face white and drawn with grief, her eyes dry. Around her a crew of a dozen men stood with hats in hand while Alberto Carrillo crossed himself and said a prayer in Spanish as Wesley Gutterbien and Daniel Boone Grayson shoveled the last spade full of earth on the red mound atop the naked hill. She turned then, her chin lifted, and she spoke quietly.

"Thank you for staying,'" she said. "For myself and for my brother. We had a dream, the two of us, about driving Texas cattle to Kansas. We though the war was over, but it isn't. You've fought enough. I won't hold you to any bargain." She walked slowly down the hill.

A young fellow wearing a blue uniform shirt scratched his chin and said, "What's the first thing we do? I ain't never seen a cow until I come to this damn Rebel land."

"We better figger out who's gonna be trail boss," old Daniel said.

Ralph, one of the Yankees who had beaten Ben that first time he had met Betty Dean, stepped forward now and said, "How about Captain Weatherby here? Would he make a good boss?"

"This is a Yankee herd," Ben Weatherby said. "Maybe it would be better if you had a Yankee trail boss."

Ralph shook his head. "You damn Johnny Rebs," he said. "Can't forget the war, can you? This ain't no Yankee herd. This is a Texas herd headin'

for Kansas and these damn wall-eyed brutes don't know blue from gray and never will."

"Let's settle for green," another Yankee said. "The kind of green that comes on bank notes."

"Them in favor of Captain Weatherby for trail boss say so," Ralph said.

Ben waited for the vote. He was a captain again, but this time he hadn't bought his way in. He was captain because the men wanted him to be captain—He hitched his good shoulder and spat at his toe.

"All right," he said. "The first order is, forget the damn titles. My name's Ben. I only got one arm right now, but that don't mean I can't fight if I have to." He looked at the grinning men and decided he liked them even better than he had thought at first. His voice became serious.

"It won't be a picnic, boys. Even if—" He started to use Clete's name and then steered around it. "Even if somebody don't try to take the herd away from us, we'll have stampedes and rivers to cross and long, dry drives. It's a long ways to Kansas."

"We don't care how far it is," a Texas brush popper drawled. "Jest so it's still there when we get there."

And they'd get there, Ben Weatherby knew. His arm pained him like sin but he kept working, actually almost thankful for the physical pain, for it kept his mind off other things. He picked his men for point riders and swing riders and turned the chuck wagon over to old Daniel. The wrangling job went to Sam Houston Bates.

"If you still operate like you used to, Sam Houston," Ben said, "we ought to have ten times as many horses when we get to Kansas."

"Now that's damn deroggery of yuh, Ben," Sam Houston said.

Ben moved on, a Rebel soldier deploying Yankee troops for war.

He purposely avoided Betty until it was no longer possible and then, riding beside her, he tried to turn the conversation to anything but the thing he knew was on her mind. Finally she reached across and touched his arm.

"There's no use of our trying to ignore it," she said.

"Clete's all right," Ben said quickly. "Don't blame yourself for falling for him. He's just not the settling-down kind, that's all. He's probably a hundred miles from here by now."

"He's in town," Betty said. "Or on his way to stop us."

"You can't believe everything you hear," Ben snapped. He spurred his horse and got away from her, and he rode up and joined one of the point riders. "See anything?" he asked.

The rider shook his head. "I ain't," he said, "but that Mexican riding opposite me there was just yellin' about something. I was just gonna go see—"

"I'll go," Ben said.

It took a long while to work his way around the still spooky herd, and by the time he reached Alberto Carrillo there was no reason to ask what the Mexican wanted. A half mile ahead a line of twelve riders waited. They had stopped the chuck wagon and were holding old Daniel.

"I guess this is it, *amigo*," Ben said. He had trouble with his voice. Clete was there, a little ahead of the others, a general commanding his army.

Ben saw Clete's arm rise and fall,

and the riders came down the valley at a full run. Too late they realized that it was only a skeleton crew of four men with that entire herd. The others came charging in from the side where Ben had stationed them, guns blazing, and Clete Weatherby rode straight into an ambush set by his brother.

The cattle stampeded at the first shots, a wild, bawling band of mossy-horn outlaws. For just a second they stood stock-still, then they ran and the fever of the leaders passed itself back through the herd until the entire herd was a mass of movement. Clete and his men, caught by the side fire and by the threat of the stampede, turned and came face to face with Alberto, Ben, and three Yankee drovers.

Ben hesitated for just a second to make sure Betty was on the highest prominence of land where he had left her, then he rode into the fight, holding his reins with his teeth, his six-shooter in his right hand. He held his fire, knowing he wouldn't be able to reload, saving his bullets for what he felt had to be his own job. He saw Clete, saw the terror on his brother's face, and then Clete was bending low in his saddle, running. Ben spurred his horse and followed.

He had ridden a hundred yards or more before he realized that Alberto was riding with him. The little Mexican's face was fixed in a set grimace and he kept crowding closer and closer to Ben. He had a gun in his hand. It raised and crashed down against Ben's wounded shoulder. Ben gave a quick cry of pain and surprise and lost his reins from his teeth. His half-crazy horse started to buck, then turned and ran back.

"Sorry, *amigo*," Ben heard Alberto call. There was something else, but Ben didn't catch it. His horse pitched him off and he hit the ground hard. Everything went black and then light and Betty was kneeling by him, caressing his face, calling his name. A tall stranger with a badge on his vest stood just behind her.

"A little sawed-off Mexican," the law-man was saying. "Always grinning, played a guitar—"

Betty started to answer and Ben put his good arm around her and pulled her close. He kissed her, so she couldn't answer the lawman. But after he started he discovered he didn't want to quit.

The sheriff cleared his throat. "Know anything about him?"

"No," Ben said. "Not a thing."

Betty sat there with his arm around her, her mouth open, her eyes wide, and she looked as if perhaps she would never speak again.

"I'll look around," the sheriff said.

"Sure," Ben said. "I'll go with you." He let the sheriff help him into the saddle and together they covered the scene of the battle.

Old Daniel and one of the Yankee soldiers were dead. Wesley Gutterbien had a bullet nick in one leg but he didn't seem to mind. He was limping around, muttering to himself.

"Need a new boss around here," he said. "Every time you look for Ben he's kissin' a woman or some damn-fool thing."

They moved on, the sheriff and Ben Weatherby, and the conflict of emotions Ben felt was like a huge weight swinging back and forth in empty space. He was riding here, talking to this lawman, answering questions

about the fight, telling of Jake Acton and of Matthew Dean, the Yankee, and all the time his eyes were searching, praying he wouldn't find Clete's body—praying he would. . . .

It lay in the bottom of a dry wash, face upward, a long, thin knife hilt deep in its chest. Not three feet away was the body of Alberto Carrillo, the Mexican. He had that same smile on his face, even in death. His gun was in its holster.

The sheriff dismounted slowly and knelt there momentarily by the two bodies, giving them his critical and professional study. He stood up slowly then and met Ben's eyes. Something he saw there kept him from asking the reason why Ben had lied about knowing the Mexican.

"Damnedest thing I ever saw," he said gruffly. "Carrillo was lightning with a gun, but he didn't even draw it. Looks like he kept right on coming with that knife even after he had a couple of bullets in him. Suicide, I'd call it. Must of got wind that I was on his trail."

"What did you want him for?" Ben asked dully.

"He killed his brother," the sheriff said. "They had some kind of fallin'-out."

Ben didn't hear the rest. He mounted and rode slowly back toward the herd. There'd be lots of work today. Hours in the saddle and maybe everybody on night herd all night and then an early start up the trail in the morning. Day after day of hard work and hell after that, and finally Kansas. . . .

He saw Betty, but he didn't speak to her. He just thought of the work and the days ahead and of how a man could forget some things and never forget others. But a man could remember to be humble, always. Even a Weatherby could remember that, and in time a new generation of Weatherbys would grow side by side with the descendants of men like old Daniel and Wesley Gutterbien and Sam Houston Bates.

He looked at the crew and saw Rebel and Yank, side by side, and he thought of little Alberto, a Mexican —Ben Weatherby swallowed against the lump in his throat. Someday, he hoped, he would have a son. He would name that son Albert, he decided, after a man who had understood.

He reined his horse and rode up the slope to where Betty waited.

THE END

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Poe Dancer planned the bank job down to the last detail —but he forgot to leave a margin for error.

Blueprint

By MARVIN DE VRIES

POE DANCER sat on a stone, holding a pointed stick in his hand, a tight frown on his face, a spatter of words pouring off his lips. He looked and sounded like a schoolteacher. With painstaking care, he drew lines and squares on a piece of smooth sand in front of him. His legs were spread wide apart so they wouldn't block the view of his drawing, and he kept up a running commentary for the instruction of the men who stood around him. He was all business—outlaw business.

"This here," he explained, moving his stick down the center line, "is Main Street, Indian Council, Wyoming, U.S.A. Runs east and west. Jake,

keep your nose on this. You need it as much as anybody. I'm not going over it again."

"Good," Jake said, no doubt in answer to the last remark.

Poe Dancer lifted his eyes briefly and flicked them up and down over the squatty figure of Jake Plume. He didn't waste any words; the look was enough.

"This is Daley's Mercantile," he went on, placing the point of the stick on one of the squares. "That's your dish, Jake—you and our new convert, the Orphan Kid. It's got two windows on each side and two in back. Use the back one. Bust the one nearest the door, and you can reach around to the door lock.

"Daley keeps a sum of money in the sugar barrel under the counter at night. You can grab that if you like. It's jug money, but—" his eyes settled on Jake again with tart acrimony "—the important thing, the thing I want you to get into your fat head, is to let yourself be seen before you clear out. You're decoys, that's all—decoys to empty the town so we can take our time with the bank. I want a hot pursuit. Make 'em think they have a chance to grab you. Tease 'em. Get up their dander."

His stick moved away from the town in a northerly direction. "You've got relay horses posted here and here, so you can always outrun 'em. But give 'em a good close run all the way. Give 'em fireworks. I want that deputy out of town, a long ways out, when we hit the bank."

"You said that before," Jake mumbled.

"So I did, and I'll say it again. I want that deputy out of town."

Jake turned to the Orphan Kid. "Fella name of Tom Branson," he told the evil-eyed boy, with elaborate mimicry of Dancer's precise instructions. "You page him when we git to town. I'll be waiting at the mercantile. Then when he arrives we run."

"Work it out your own way, Jake, but remember this, I'll page *you* if you slip up on any of this." The sudden naked threat in Dancer's voice cooled Jake off considerably. This time he kept his mouth shut, and Dancer made a visible effort to pull himself back to business.

"I'm talking about Branson so much because he's the key figure. He's a new deputy, without any feathers in his hat, and he'll be out to make a name for himself—like the Orphan Kid here going the other way. Make it a big spree. Raise a racket. Do some shooting. Raise the whole town, so he'll have a full-sized posse to put on your tails. It's your business to haul every able-bodied man out of town and keep 'em out until we finish with the bank."

He went over other details, names and locations of all the buildings, descriptions of people, routes to travel in case they became separated after the bank raid, firing questions at the men around him and demanding answers as if he were conducting a lesson in geography. Once, when one of them dozed, he rapped him over the knuckles with the stick.

He timed every move, and compared his watch with Jake's. He warned them about the gully along the west edge of town so they wouldn't flounder into it in the dark. He told them where they would tie up and

where he would post guards in the street, who would take charge of the loot, and, when someone asked the question, hazarded the guess that the take would run close to a hundred thousand dollars. This drew a shrill whistle from the Orphan Kid, and his eyes sparked with greed.

"All right, we've got the town empty, except for women and kids," Dancer went on, "and except for Gabriel Dunsey, the town marshal. He's rheumatic and won't go posseing, and he's your dish, Fandango."

Fandango squirmed at the attention. He was foppish and dainty as a girl; his gun was small and fancy, and his knife had a red jewel set in the handle. "My dish," he echoed in a high voice.

"Dunsey's a natural nighthawk," Dancer continued. "He tries to open doors. He listens for noises. He's ailing, or he'd be a very big dish for you, Fandango. Don't get him mixed up with a party they call Blind Dick. He prowls around at night, too, but Dunsey has a regular route. He goes up this side of the street, that's the bank side, and then back on the other side. There's a bench in front of the saddle shop here, and he sits on that awhile after his tour. You're in the entry there behind him, Fandango, and when he sits, you stick him."

Fandango smiled again and said, "I stick."

"Then you cross the street and keep out of sight over here next to the bank. That's the Lady's Hat Shoppe, and if you see anything you like in the window you can help yourself, but your main job will be to wait for us and hold the horses when we get there. Don't smoke."

"I don't smoke."

"Oh, that's right."

"Why not kill that deputy, too?" Jake asked. "All this damn complicated stuff."

"Now listen, stupid," Poe Dancer said, clinging to the last remnants of his patience, "I want him to raise a posse and haul 'em out of town. Can't you get that through your thick head? Don't kill anybody. Just hightail."

"What did you say his name was?" the Orphan Kid asked. "This deputy, I mean."

"Branson, stupid," Jake answered. "How many times I got to tell you? Tom Branson."

It was past lamplighting time in Indian Council, but Blind Dick was still at it, groping his way from lamp post to lamp post. Not that light or dark made any difference to him, but it did to Tom Branson, the new sheriff's deputy.

Tom had seen Ann Daley go to the hat shop up the street and he didn't want to miss her when she came back. One eye on the street and one on his desk, he kept himself in check until he saw her come, then hurriedly closed up and went outside. These meetings were getting to be quite a habit, but he still pretended they were pure chance.

"Well, well," he said.

She stopped and smiled. The small mischief in her eyes embarrassed him, but she finally let his pretense stand.

"Imagine!" Her voice had a special quality, the overtones of tenderness

almost betraying her. She carried a hatbox, a pretense, too—the pretense of an errand on the street—and when he offered to carry it, she wouldn't let him because it was empty, and he might catch on.

"It's light as a feather," she told him.

They passed Blind Dick, touching his torch to a lamp with exasperated petulance. He had bitterness in his heart and face, and he didn't answer their greeting when they walked past. "Is that thing lit or ain't it?" he asked in a rasping voice.

Branson said it was. They took the hatbox home and then went walking again, clear to the gully and back. It took a long time, the way they went at it. They threw their voices across the gully and listened to them bounce back. Once, after a long silence, a coyote tried it from the other side.

They walked along a trail, and he helped her over some rough ground and almost scared up the courage to pull her to him, but he couldn't muster enough of it. Maybe she thought all this was just a friendly romp. Maybe she had no idea what he was thinking about. She might light out and run.

They walked past the bank and the hat shop, and she told him his advice to her father had put him in an uproar. "He says it's his own business where he keeps his money. If he wants it in the sugar barrel, that's where it's going to be. He says he can wear it in his hair if he wants to."

Branson laughed a little. "I know I got his dander up, but sometime somebody's going to steal it, and then he'll raise a big howl. Everybody knows he keeps it there. But he was in a bad humor when I warned him this afternoon, and he got real hot. Said he couldn't understand why Sheriff Rapp appointed me deputy out here. Said Rapp was a fool and going into his dotage. Said Rapp should have appointed Nick Marr."

"Yes, we argued about it during supper."

"What did you say?"

"I said you were right about the money, but I said you were wrong trying to argue with a stubborn old goat and I was, too, so we quit."

"Anyway, I'm sorry it happened, because he's your father, Ann, I—"

He took her arm suddenly, and stopped her. He meant to say big things, then and there, but when she looked up at him the words got lost in his throat. Perhaps panic at the sheer uncertainty of what her answer might be choked him. At any rate, his words were gone and, once again, he didn't know what else he dared to try.

He thought of opening up his arms and waiting for her to walk into them —but maybe she wouldn't. In the end, Gabriel Dunsey, the town marshal, came to the rescue.

Angling across the street at a gimpy run, he called Tom's name in a low excited voice. "Tom. Tom. Somebody's busted into Daley's. Ann, go get your pa."

Ann went down the boardwalk, and Branson crossed the street with Gabriel.

"They went in the back way," Dunsey told him. "The window's broke in."

"Did you see them go in?"

"I saw the hind legs of one."

"I'll go in," Branson said. "You

and Daley keep watch around the outside."

Dunsey nodded. He was a good watchdog and had courage, but he was rheumatic and knew his limitations.

Branson opened the door and stepped inside. This back room was a storeroom for coal oil, molasses, and vinegar, all in barrels. All raised their own private smell. It was pitch-dark. There were rats around. He heard them moving out of reach.

The next door was closed. It squeaked when he pushed on it. He got it open only a few inches when one of the windows toward the front of the building crashed, and someone out on the street fired a shot. It was probably Sam Daley. His voice, full of angry bluster, raged through the dark.

"Where's that deputy? Somebody grab a horse and get Rapp."

"That's fifty miles, Sam," Gabriel answered.

"Go on after him yourself," Sam Daley stormed. "He went through the weeds."

"Tom," Gabriel called, "out here, Tom."

Branson went out the back way and headed for the street. He waded through deep weeds and crunched over broken glass. Daley had lost most of his breath on his run from the house. He had a smoking gun in his hand. Nick Marr was with him, armed to the teeth and a deadly look in his eye. Gabriel Dunsey was making a tour of the weeds. He came back when he saw Branson.

"I don't think he got out," he said. "There'd be a trail through the weeds. I don't see anything."

"He came out," Daley blustered. "I saw him. What d'you think I was shooting at?"

"I don't know."

Town men came by ones and twos and grew into a crowd. They trampled down the weeds, but couldn't locate anyone.

"He could be a mile off by now," someone said. "With your sugar money, Sam."

"Dammit," Daley exploded, "I never thought of that. I'll go see."

"No," Branson said. "I think he's still inside."

Daley made a jeering sound, and Nick Marr backed it up with a laugh. "I don't get you, Branson," he said. "I don't get you a-tall. Must be you don't like routin' him outa the weeds." Another smug laugh went with this.

It made Branson uncomfortable. He was on trial here and, for Rapp's sake, he couldn't afford to make a mis-move. He had worked under Rapp in Jericho Junction for some time to get experience before taking charge in Indian Council. Rapp had a way of making the work seem simple and straightforward.

Crooks are like grassfire, were his usual words. *Stomp 'em out where you find 'em. That's all there's to it. You'll probably stomp on a few innocent toes once in a while, but that's neither here nor there. A quick stomp usually saves a big blaze.*

That was all Rapp had to say, and he said it from the bleak and lonely place to which he had climbed, where it was easy to separate the snaky trails that lead to nowhere from those that brought a man to his goal. It wasn't so easy when a man stood knee-deep in

the pull of dissensions and misgivings, with Daley too sure of himself, with Nick Marr sniping at him out of spite and spleen, with the wise countenance of age itself gauging him and watching him, looking for flaws because his years were less than theirs.

Tom Branson could see it in their bearded faces, in all their grudging eyes. Rapp had thrown all such wearisome chaff away. To vindicate Rapp's faith, Branson could do no less.

"I'll go in and have another look," he announced.

He went in the back way again, using as much caution as he had the first time. He moved through the storeroom, with the sharp sting of vinegar and treacle and coal oil simmering up his nose. He got past the second door in spite of its squeaks and crouched beside the dry-goods counter. He moved forward, still in a crouch, bracing himself with one hand on the edge of the counter.

A faint light came in through the front windows, vaguely outlining all the gimcracks hanging from the ceiling. He heard the scraping sound of metal on metal, and tried to locate it. He got the impression that the front door was swinging open, and what he heard was probably the key in the door. Then he heard Daley's voice.

"Come on in, Nick. We'll see about that sugar money right now. Come on, come on. Strike a light." His voice went up a little. "Branson?"

Branson didn't answer. Nick struck a match, and it glowed for a moment and went out. Branson caught a sound behind the counter close to him and raised his head so his eyes were level with the counter. He didn't see much, perhaps a vague movement, like one dark cloud against another, enough so he called out to Daley to get out, enough so he lifted his gun over the edge. Then his head exploded under a stunning blow and he went down. At the same instant, there was a swift flurry at the door. He heard Daley's sudden grunt of alarm. He heard a shot, and then all sound and feeling slipped away, and he plunged into the black swirl stirred up by death's close wings. . . .

He came to on the store gallery, with cool air brushing across his face and a soft clamor going on around him. Light shone on his face from a lantern hanging from an upright. The store door stood open. His head was in Ann Daley's lap. His hair was soaked.

A wet cloth lay across his forehead. He reached up and pulled it off. Doc Williams's medicine satchel stood beside him, a smolder of strange smells coming out of it. Tag-ends of bandage and batting sprouted out of the loose edges. Gabriel Dunsey and Blind Dick were there. The rest were women, some with their hair in curlers.

Ann touched her cool hand to his forehead and he closed his eyes again, savoring the look of deep concern in her eyes.

"What happened?" he asked finally. "I saw Daley at the door. Then I got hit."

"There were two of them," Gabriel said, "a youngster and an older man. One of them must have been after you. The other grabbed Daley and pulled him inside. Nick was slow going in and got away. He took a shot at 'em, but I don't reckon he hit anything."

"Where's everybody now?"

"Trailing 'em. They made a dicker. They wanted a ten-minute start out of town and threatened to kill you and Daley if we didn't give it to them, so that's what happened. We gave 'em their start, then everybody grabbed a horse and took after 'em, Nick in the lead, of course. I don't know what else could've been done, Tom. I heard some shooting out there awhile back. I guess they're giving them a hot chase. There'll soon be a moon. It might help."

"Did Daley go, too?"

"Yes."

Branson pushed up. Ann raised an objection, but when it didn't stop him, she helped steady him, holding his shoulders.

"How long ago was this?"

"About an hour," Gabriel said. He seemed to sense Branson's disapproval of the deal and added, "I don't see what else could've been done, Tom."

"Take it easy, Branson," Doc Williams warned. "I'm going home."

Branson thanked him. "You better go, too, Ann. You'll catch your death. All you ladies better go."

Ann wanted him to go along to her house, but he wouldn't. "I'm all right."

"You aren't to go after them," she told him suspiciously.

"No. I don't think I could sit a horse. Besides, I wouldn't know where to go. They'll have to chase that wild goose by themselves, at least until morning."

Gabriel Dunsey stayed with him. "Things went wrong, of course, but you can't blame anyone for making the dicker, Tom. Your life was involved."

"That was involved when I took the job. It doesn't excuse a dicker like that. They wouldn't've killed anybody. What good would it have done them? They would've hung for it."

"I know, Tom, and I did try to stop it." He turned his head so Branson could see the bruise along his face. "That's from Nick when I spoke up. It floored me for a while, and when I pulled myself together it was past all stopping. Maybe he was right, anyway."

"You go on your rounds," Branson told him. "I'll sit here awhile. My head's easing up."

Gabriel moved off into the dark. Branson's head was far from easing up. Dull remnants of pain drifted clear down into his legs and tied his muscles into knots. A thin moon was trying to get up out of the Red Bird Buttes. Coyotes began to howl in the far hills. Once he thought he heard horsemen, and wondered if the posse had already given up, but the sound died out.

He thought about Gabriel and the small meannesses that engulfed him, trying the town doors, watering down neglected trash fires, herding drunks home, putting the town to bed in little ways no one knew about, sitting on the bench in front of the saddle shop after his tour of duty, perhaps mulling over what he had seen and what he had missed, sorting out the things that should be told and the ones he ought to keep to himself.

He heard the sound of horsemen again, closer this time, coming from

the direction of the gully. He got up and started that way, weaving a little before he could get his feet to track straight. He passed the feed store with the sway-backed awning that Hooker was always going to fix, past the vacant lots on the other side where high weeds arched over the boardwalk. He passed the Bean Pot where he usually ate, and the printing-shop that had gone out of business.

"They're coming back," he said when he saw Gabriel sitting on the bench in front of the saddle shop, but he didn't get an answer.

"They're coming back, Gabriel. Let's go see what—"

He let the rest go. Gabriel was asleep. Branson stepped to the bench and put his hand on the marshal's shoulder, but it didn't rouse him. Branson shook him, but it didn't help, and when he lifted his hand, Gabriel tumbled sideways.

Branson caught him. His hand touched a wet seep along his back. His probing fingers found the thin gaping knife wound between his shoulder blades that had sent him on his way.

The returning riders made a clatter in the street, and he turned to look. They didn't look like the posse. One of them rode an apaloosa, and he couldn't think of anyone in town who owned one. There were seven in all. One dropped back and stopped in the middle of the street. Five of them swung to the hitchrack in front of the Lady's Hat Shoppe next to the bank and dismounted.

"Okay, Fandango," the man on the apaloosa called, "come out and hold these horses."

One rider came a hundred feet farther down the road and stopped there. A man came out of the deep dark beyond the boardwalk on the far side of the street and gathered up the reins. The other four moved toward the bank. One of them stopped to light a lantern. Another laughed. There was the jangle of nerves in it, and he got a crisp rebuke.

"He don't need to light it before we git inside," the other exploded. "I don't think much of it anyway, Dancer—all these fancy capers."

"Move along," Dancer answered him.

Glass in the bank door went to pieces and they stood aside until the clatter died down. Then they went in through the hole.

Branson hugged the buildings and tried to get past the block-off. The guard sat a fiery horse and had trouble holding it down, but, in spite of his horse trouble, he caught sight of Branson and fired a shot. The bullet went through glass on the other side, and Branson found cover in the entry straight across from the bank.

The rider came at him with gun blazing, an open target, and Branson knocked him off his horse with one shot. The man let out a sharp yelp, rolled, got up and sagged again, and finally retreated toward the bank on all fours.

The other guard charged in, giving him cover, spraying lead along the building. He didn't seem to know where Branson was, but a stray shot hit the deputy in the foot, turning it numb and cold. The rider cut a tight circle across the street and wound up in front of the bank. Dancer spoke to him from the doorway, then went back out of sight.

The rider made another sweep. He shot out one of Blind Dick's lamps, and this time poured lead into the entry, but Branson had shifted into the weeds alongside, and the reckless charge cost the man his life. Branson's bullet lifted him out of his saddle, like a bird shot head-on, and dropped him to the ground behind his horse. He didn't move again.

Poe Dancer came to the doorway again and called Fandango, sending the wounded man to hold the horses. Branson fired a shot that splintered glass close to Dancer's head, but the outlaw only looked at it and went on with his business. He called out another man and sent him with Fandango to rout Branson out.

"Now get him," he ordered. "What kind of foolin' is this, anyway?" Then he went back inside.

The town came alive again. It was a shrill panicky sound, like birds gathering for flight. A shotgun roared from a distance, doing no one any harm. Branson couldn't think of anyone left in town who could use a gun to much purpose. They were all off with the posse. Gabriel Dunsey's name wailed through the dark when they found his body.

"Don't come this way," Branson called out. "You're too close now. Go on back."

"Tom!" Ann's voice rose above those of the others.

"Keep everybody back, Ann," he answered her.

The solid boom of dynamite and a flash of vivid light came out of the bank. Dancer came back to the door, his arm wrapped around his face, smoke swirling around him. Gunfire, probably leveled at the stubborn safe, made angry spiteful barks.

Branson broke his gun and thumbed in fresh cartridges. The two men Dancer had sent out were quartering toward him from opposite directions. He caught sight of the one in the gay outfit first. Light struck some frippery on his *calzoneras*.

Branson fired, and the shot must have struck him dead center. He screamed like a girl, whirled like a dervish into better light, and crashed to the ground. Lead leaped at Branson from the other side, but none of it hit him.

Dancer raised his voice above the uproar, ordering the horses. The wounded man, limping like a broken wheel, herded them in a bunch toward the bank entrance. Dancer stepped onto the boardwalk. A man came out carrying two stuffed gunnysacks. The man carrying the lantern threw it into the street where it smoked and smoldered to death. The man stalking Branson went back and joined them.

"What's the matter with you ducks?" Dancer asked him.

"Fandango got it," the other replied.

A fire inside the bank threw a small glow through the broken windows. It gave Branson a slight advantage. He got up and moved forward. Dancer was looking straight at him, but didn't seem to see him.

Branson opened up and hit another man. He shifted away from the telltale gunflame before their guns answered him. Dancer went up on the apaloosa. An odd horse for a night rider to use, Branson thought.

The outlaw showed no panic. The

lost men probably meant nothing to him. He had his loot, and death to some was part of the price. Disciplined, calculating, cold-blooded, he wouldn't allow himself to be sucked into a retaliating gun fight. He was playing his hand out the way he had started it, with professional skill and cunning, and if something had gone wrong, he didn't intend to let it stop him.

His men sprayed the street with wild haphazard gunfire, trying to find a target. Branson, dragging his numbed foot, ran head on into it. He reached the middle of the street. Then a bullet hit him, higher up on the same leg, and brought him to his knees. Pain hit him a second later, and threw him flat on his face in the dust. It numbed his brain and pulled him into the shadows.

His gun fell out of his hand. His senses swirled like vapor, but he had enough left to realize none of the outlaws had seen him. They had raked the street with gunfire to keep him back. They didn't know he was hit.

Play 'possum and let 'em ride, he told himself. *Don't start it all over again.*

Clamorous objections came from inside and out, from torn flesh and shattered bone, and the far silences where voices called, but he clawed forward and found his gun, and pushed up to his knees again. He fired and saw a man go down. He shifted and fired again and another tumbled out of his saddle.

A flurry of confusion engulfed the clump of riders and horses. Gunflame reached at him again, lifting dust in his face. Then Poe Dancer let out an exasperated oath, swung away from the rest, and tried to run him down on the apaloosa.

Their guns blazed. Gunflame slashed back and forth. Some of it clashed and burst into bloom like sudden night flowers, like the swift leap of Sheriff Rapp's grassfire. Then it all died in a black cloud and Branson tumbled to the ground again.

The posse returned to Indian Council the next day, empty-handed. Pine planking came from the lumber yard and went into the yard behind the undertaking parlors. Daley opened his store and got the glazier busy on the broken windows.

Nick Marr stopped at the undertaker's and gave what looked like important instructions. He sat awhile on the bench in front of the saddle shop where poor Gabriel had met his everlasting end and explained the incident and its implications to curious passers-by. In spite of the failure of the pick-up posse, he looked like a man who could find no fault in himself.

Tom Branson saw all this from the street window at Doc Williams's house. The curtain was drawn, but it left an inch of space to look through and watch the town mend its bruises and its dignity. He saw Ann Daley come to the house and he heard Doc Williams turn her away. It raised his dander, and when Doc came into the room later, he gave him to understand it wasn't to happen again.

"All right," Doc snapped. "Kick

off. I don't care." He stormed out, slamming the door behind him.

Branson wore three bandages, one around his foot, one around his leg higher up, and one around his neck and shoulder. They were all on the same side, and it was hard to move, but his eyes were lively, and he didn't miss much on the street.

Later in the day, Sheriff Rapp arrived on a hard-ridden horse and roved the town asking questions. Nick Marr took him in charge with a swagger that grew by the hour. Rapp didn't come near Branson until late in the day. Branson had dozed off and when he woke up, Rapp, Sam Daley, and Nick Marr were walking in.

Rapp looked sour. He said he had no complaints, but Branson could see he did.

"Quite a mess, Sheriff," Branson remarked. Rapp agreed.

"That posse quit dead on me," Nick put in. "If I could've swore 'em in, it would have been a different story, believe me. Looks like you'll be laid up for some time, Branson."

"Oh, I don't know," Branson said. "Maybe a day or two."

Rapp knew the names of the outlaws who had lost their lives—Poe Dancer, the big augur, Fandango, and three others. "From reports, three got away."

"My gun must've run empty," Branson said, with a hint of apology, "but as it figures out, I must've got five."

"Yeah. Only five."

"All right. Only five."

Rapp couldn't keep it up. "Just how big an army do you think you can handle alone?"

"It was mostly one by one. I was sore about Gabriel. Anyway, I just kept tromping away."

Poe Dancer had explained his scheme and intentions to someone before he breathed his last, and Rapp repeated what he had said.

"Some of it didn't go according to plan, either at the store or at the bank. It made him feel pretty bad. He was always a great one with a plan. I will say I don't think it was luck that made it run the way it did. Anyway, it was quite a blaze and, incidentally, you did save the bank cash."

"Incidentally," Branson echoed.

Rapp let out a dry satisfied chuckle, as if it were the one word he had come all the way from Jericho Junction to hear. He turned on Nick Marr and asked, "Anything keeping you here, Nick?"

Nick scratched his head. "No, I guess not," he said finally, and went out.

"Or you, Sam?" Rapp went on.

"Yes, there is," Daley said, with a show of defiance. He looked at Branson, "I came to say Ann's getting a room ready for you at our house and we would be proud to have you occupy it. Doc can't keep you here, she says, and she wants to nurse you back to health."

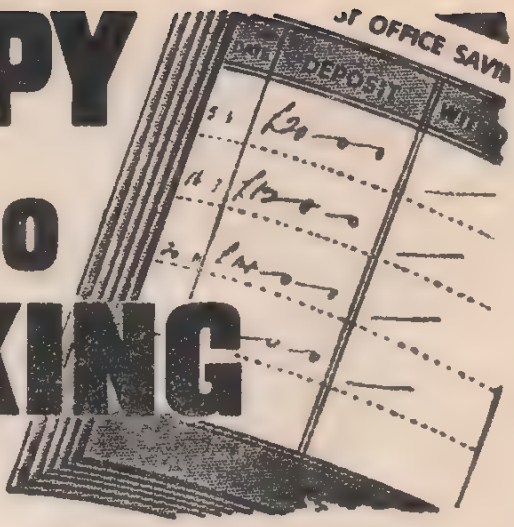
"That's too much," Branson said.

"No, 'tain't, Tom, for the reason that she's got more on her mind than your health."

"Well, all right—" Tom grinned "—for the reason that I have, too."

THE END

THE HAPPY ENDING to the SMOKING HABIT



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Welcome to the Bride!

By ED LaVANWAY

Ben knew he'd have to have it out with them Greers. If it wasn't over this gal it'd be over a twenty-dollar steer or something else. . . .

TRYING to make up lost time, Ben Sefton sent the team of bays down the road at a gallop and the spinning wheels of the buckboard seemed to touch the ground only at the high spots. There was no mud; along here it had rained just enough to lay the dust.

The sky was still leaden in all directions, though. West, dark cloud masses choked the high alpine valleys of the Sierra, where the cloudburst had been, and it looked as though Crooked Creek would stay out of its banks for hours.

Ben Sefton was still cursing Crooked Creek, or, rather, the deluge that had washed out the bridge and com-

pelled him to lose a couple of hours finding a spot to ford the swollen stream.

Holding tight lines so the bays wouldn't hit a dead run, Ben sat with his long legs braced; and the fluttering pressure of the wind on his new high-crowned Stetson kept his chinstrap taut. Two hours behind time, and it could mean the difference between winning or losing, he told himself.

The way Ben looked at it, if a man didn't make his word good in one instance, a person might consider him the sort who wouldn't make it good in another; and Ben had promised to be in Antlers at seven o'clock.

The bridge hadn't been much and this road over which he now tooled the bays wasn't much either; just a pair of ruts that snaked in and out of sage-covered knolls, across grassy flats, along rocky ridges, and through scattered patches of scrub cedar. It led from Ben's S-Bench spread in the upper valley to the cowtown of Antlers—and the railroad—an hour or more of travel ahead.

The dark-haired young rancher was alone in the buckboard, but he had company.

His foreman, "Touchy" Tolin, a wiry little man with faded mustaches and unusually wide bowed legs, had ridden with him until they had reached the creek. Touchy had untied his led sorrel and climbed into saddle there and he hadn't left it since. Except when he had to fall behind or ride on ahead because of the terrain, he had kept within quarreling distance, matching his sorrel's pace to the speed of the buckboard.

Ben's rousting the foreman out at two a.m. to make this trip had enraged the man, who bellered loud enough to awaken every rannihan in the S-Bench bunkhouse.

Touchy Tolin had brooded morosely as he bolted the early meal and he didn't say half a dozen words until they reached Crooked Creek to find the bridge gone. He said then, "Maybe we'll get drowned, Ben."

"Don't sound so hopeful," Ben told him.

Unlike Ben, who wore a new store suit of blue serge, the foreman refused to dude up any. He had donned his regular working garb of floppy hat, faded Levi's, woolen shirt, and spotted kipskin vest. Unlike his boss, too, Touchy wore his gunbelt and six-shooter; Ben had tucked his Colt behind the waistband of his trousers.

The rancher figured that openly wearing gun harness on this day would be a little out of place. He knew better than to show himself in town completely unarmed, however.

The bays slowed to a walk, ascending the last rise, and Ben's foreman rode on ahead. Touchy had a sweeping view of all the lower valley from the crest of the ridge and, scanning the east, he stopped his horse. Turning to Ben as the young cowman pulled up beside him, he said, "We ain't going to make it, Ben."

Touchy leveled a finger. Ben turned his gaze in that direction and saw smoke. It was just a barely discernible smudge on the gloomy eastern horizon, but it was enough to put a glum look on Ben's face.

"See it?" Touchy asked.

"Yeah," Ben said, and added. "Well, we didn't know. It could have been late. It's late more often than it's on time."

Ben Sefton kept looking until the locomotive with its string of varnish hove into sight off yonder and then he started the bays on down the long slant. He let them take their time now, for there was no point in hurrying to meet a train that had already run.

"Lit up real purty, too," Touchy observed, keeping his horse close to Ben's rig.

The foreman was referring, of course, to the lamps in the coaches, still burning because of the overcast sky.

"Yeah," Ben said, and watched the train speed across the flat stretch of desert toward Antlers. The town, with its depot and water tank, weathered frame buildings and tall black poplar trees, was visible now and would be from here on. "It'll have to stop, anyway, to take on water." Ben added.

"Whistling for the station now," Touchy said, seeing steam, and then the sound reached them. The foreman lost interest in the train and rode on, listening to the hoofbeats, the grinding wheels of Ben's rig, the slapping of the bays' harness, and the whispering of his own saddle-leather.

Ben said, "A man oughtn't to be out without a spy-glass. Any other time I would have had one."

The train was underway again, moving even before the highball floated up, and as it sped toward the Sierra, Ben also lost interest.

"You better remember to order some more bridge timbers, boss."

Ben nodded. "If I'd had a spy-glass," he said, "I could have told whether she came or not."

"With you not there to meet her, Ben, you reckon she would get off?"

"Why wouldn't she?"

"She could have kept on going to Californy. Take me; if I had been on a train the first time I laid eyes on Antlers, I'd of sure kept on going. That's a lonesome-looking depot, nohow, and with nobody there to—"

"George Baggott was there to meet her," Ben said. "I told him if something happened and I didn't get in, to go over and get her and take her to the hotel. He had her room ready."

"Did you have him purty it up a little? New curtains and stuff? How about the mattress? Did you caution him about that? Last time I stayed there, the bedbugs—"

"I told him."

The foreman nodded approval. Reaching into his Levi's for his plug of chewing, he wiped the lint off on his pants leg and leaned over to offer it to Ben, who curtly refused.

Filling his own jaw, Touchy said, "I don't blame you. It's a messy habit. Worse'n smoking. And if a man's figuring on kissing—"

"You know damned well I don't chew and never did!"

The road dipped into a ravine, too narrow for both saddle horse and rig. and the foreman slowed down, dropping behind. When he caught up again, he said, "Ben, I'll bet you'll wish you had taken my advice about this."

"That's the way you are, Touchy. You think you know it all. Just be-

cause you were married once, twenty years ago, you figure you savvy women better than anybody."

"You'll see, Ben. Why, you ain't got the fainest idee of what you're letting yourself in for. Mail order woman or not, this gal won't be nothing at all like the ones you've been used to. Before you can get nigh her, you'll have to use soap and water and a curry-comb."

"I take a bath regular!"

"You don't take one every day, though, and that's what she'll make you do. And when you lay hands on her, you'll have to do it gentlelike, for she'll bruise easy. And you won't be grabbing her and whirling her off her feet. And you won't be blowing no smoke in her face. And you won't be clapping *her* on the rump."

"Hell," Ben said, "I don't recollect ever doing any of those things."

"Ben, when you get to drinking—"

"I haven't been in a saloon in over a year!"

"Well, when you do drink, you go plumb blank. And wild. My God, I'll never forget that time in Cheyenne when—"

"You'd better forget it!" Ben told him.

The town had no residential section. False-fronted store building and box-and-batten cottage of the owner were generally on the same lot. Some of the merchants even had living quarters in the same building in which they vended their wares. So when Ben Sefton and his foreman reached the railroad crossing, they were in Antlers.

Ben drove across the tracks, pulled the team to the side of the road and stopped. He indicated the yellow-painted depot, two hundred yards up a tree-lined side street, and told Touchy Tolin, "Go see if she came. Ask Eli if George met her."

"Ain't you sort of sticking your neck out, Ben? We ought to wait and see how she pans out, before we let folks know that you—"

"I had to tell George."

"Why, sure," Touchy said, "and he's done spread the news."

"Well, go on and see."

The foreman lifted his bridle reins, turned his horse and headed for the station, but he refused to hurry; he held the sorrel to a snail-like amble that wrung from Ben an oath.

Waiting, Ben turned his gaze on Casey Hicks's blacksmith shop, across and farther down the street. A dozen men stood, sat, or moved about the front and rear of the place. Two appeared to be swapping horses and two others were hunkered against the propped-open front door, whittling.

Inside, Casey Hicks was shoeing a horse and the anvil's ring as he shaped a shoe was music to Ben Sefton.

One of the whittlers looked straight at Ben, dropped his chin and must have spoke, for immediately another man showed in the doorway. He was Rupe Greer and he planted himself on spread heels to stare arrogantly. Although he had developed a paunch that bulged both above and below his cartridge belt, he was a powerful man, heavy of leg and arm, with a thick neck and a coarse-hewn visage.

By way of showing him he wasn't afraid of him, Ben met Rupe's glare for a moment and then he turned to look in the opposite direction, toward the depot. Horses weren't allowed on

the apron in front of the building and Touchy had left his horse at the tie-bar, bowlegging it around to the ticket office. Ben watched his foreman only briefly, however, for he heard Rupe Greer's heavy stride and jangling spurs approaching the buckboard.

Ben faced around and the paunchy, raven-haired cattleman came up beside the rig without saying anything. He stood and blinked a moment.

"Who do you think owns the Barbed Trey?" he asked finally.

"You do," Ben said. "You and your brothers."

"Then we ought to have the say-so about the cattle we run, hadn't we?"

Ben wrapped the lines around his left hand, freeing his right.

"Answer me!"

"Rupe, we're all in this together," Ben said earnestly, "and whatever the majority decides to do is—"

"If you'd keep your trap shut there wouldn't be no majority!"

"Aren't you interested in making more money? Isn't that why you're in the cattle business, to begin with? If you would—"

"If I would let you run the whole damn country!" Rupe said harshly. He took a deep and unsteady breath. "Longhorns was good enough for the old man and they're good enough for me and Clint and Stevie. And you listen to me, Ben! Don't let me hear tell of you, personally, shooting or stagging any of my bulls."

"If the majority decides to clear the range of scrubs, Rupe, you fellas will have to go along."

"Who said so?"

Rupe's lip curled. Unexpectedly—Ben had looked for him to pull his six-gun—he lashed out with his left fist, reaching high with a blow that smashed against Ben's cheekbone. Ben swayed on the seat, jackknifing a leg. Thrusting that boot forward, he felt it strike Rupe in the face. Blood spurted from the man's nose and he slung his head sideways and down.

He still didn't go for his gun and Ben whipped up the team, pulling over into the road as he drove on. He glanced back then and saw his foreman riding warily around the big man, six-shooter drawn and lined on Rupe's chest.

"Kind of took advantage of him, didn't you, Ben?" Touchy asked, falling in beside the rig.

"I can't help that."

"You've got a skinned-up face, though."

"Hit me with a tub-handle or something," Ben said, and stared intently. "What did Eli say? She come?"

"Eli wasn't there. The ticket office was locked up. Gone to breakfast, I reckon. These here town folks don't eat as early as we do."

"Yeah, George met her," Ben said confidently.

"The next time you get me up at two o'clock to come—"

"Oh, hell, Touchy. I won't do it any more."

They had come now to Tom Chesley's Star Livery. Ben made a wide swing with the buckboard and the foreman, whose horse had been trained to back, opened the main gate without dismounting. Touchy rode on into the lot then, leaving the hostler, who had emerged from the office, to shut the gate behind Ben.

Ben stopped just inside the fence to

step down and hand Tom the lines.

The oldster peered closely at Ben's bruised face but said nothing because he was compelled to turn an attentive ear to Touchy Tolin, who gave explicit instructions for the proper care of the sorrel. Tom indicated with slight nods that he understood the S-Bench foreman and then he turned to Ben, saying, with a touch of derision, "What are you all dressed up for —going to a funeral?"

"Hope not," Ben said fervently. He knew the hostler was slyly rawhiding him about Rupe, Clint, and Stevie Greer. "No, Tom, no funeral. I'm sort of calculating on getting married, and don't act like you didn't already know it."

"Yeah, I heard it, Ben. Fact is, I had a look at your gal. And if you don't mind me saying so, you're getting a mighty pretty little filly. God, I'd like to be your age and marrying up with a right healthy—"

"You're a better man than he is, right now, Tom," Touchy said.

"Oh, no. I'm all shot to pieces."

Ben was flushing. He said, "Where did you see her, Tom?"

"Depot. Up there collecting from Eli. Me and him played poker last night. Down at the Palace. Say, you ought to drop by the Palace before you pull out for home. They've got some—"

"You were there, Tom, when she got off the train?" Ben asked. "Guess George Baggott met her, didn't he, and took her to his place?"

The old man's lips twitched.

Ben said, in louder tone, "Guess George—"

"I heard you, Ben. Why, no, George didn't meet her. I hate to be the one to put you on the warpath, but Clint and Stevie did. I rented them that surrey yonder."

Ben didn't look at it. He stood with downcast eyes and when he lifted them, they were cold.

"As I was saying," Tom continued, "I went in with a pat hand. Sevens over deuces. Eli had—"

Turning abruptly, Ben headed out, climbing over instead of opening the gate. Right behind him, his foreman said, "Now, wait, Ben . . ."

Ben hit the ground outside with jingling spurs. He stepped from the driveway to the boardwalk in front of the stable office and there he stopped, giving Touchy Tolin a defiant, glinting look.

"Give me a chance to at least catch my wind before you start somethin'," Touchy said.

"You ride for the brand, Touchy. This is personal, and I don't aim for you to mix in it."

"I mix in wherever I damn please, Ben."

Already knowing that only too well, Ben frowned defensively. He indicated the ornate facade of the hotel, obliquely across the street, saying, "I'd just started over to find out why George let me down."

"You already know why. Rupe, Clint, and Stevie. They scared him off. But that ain't the point, Ben. The gal ain't."

"She's worth fighting for."

"Sure. Even sight unseen."

Ben pulled his coat aside and showed his six-gun. "Didn't you know I had it?"

"That wasn't why I stopped you. I realize we've got to have it out with them Greers. And if it isn't over this

gal, it'll be over a twenty-dollar steer or something. But let's don't go off half-cocked."

Ben wanted to go on, and he didn't want to, for he had learned long ago that his foreman's judgment was generally sound. He deliberated, hearing the myriad sounds of the town, from the pounding of a sledge as some builder shaped a rock to the seething of the tree leaves under a freshening breeze.

His gaze roved. Attention on the people, mostly men astir at this hour, he took no notice of the familiar store buildings and shacks, the ranch wagons and rigs, or the saddle mounts at the hitching places.

Above him, a burly man wearing a flat-crowned hat on the back of his red-thatched head and a shiny lawbadge on the left top pocket of his cloth vest was coming down the sidewalk, and he said to his foreman, "Well, come on then, and we'll go get something to eat."

They had only to cut across to the second building below the hotel—Juan and Pamfillia Trujillo's Blue Front Cafe—but as they left the boardwalk, Ben heard the lawman, Marshal Clyde Siples, voice his name.

"Speaking to me, Clyde?"

"Yeah—wait."

Because they now had their backs to the hotel, Ben and Touchy didn't see the two men and a girl who emerged from the lobby onto the spacious veranda. Marshal Siples did, though, and it constrained him, as he came on, to maintain a rigid silence.

"Clyde," one of the men called, "have you seen Rupe?"

"Yeah. He's up there with Casey Hicks, playing checkers."

"He looking for us?"

"I don't reckon, Clint. He didn't say so."

Ben Sefton was facing the hotel veranda now, staring narrowly at the trio, particularly the girl.

Like Rupe, the two younger men had raven hair and dark eyes. Clint was big and heavy, too, but without the paunch. He was pushing thirty. Stevie, evenly featured and well-built if slightly thin, was twenty-three.

Both wore the big hat, spurred boots and holstered six-gun of the range, but where Stevie wore jeans and a fringed white deerskin hunting shirt, Clint had on woolen pants, starched shirt, and vest.

The girl was attired all in gray: traveling suit with voluminous skirt, gloves, and a pert hat with a veil. Ben could see distinctly the lower part of her face and some of her blond hair, which had as bright a gleam as any man could have longed for.

"Look anything like her pitcher?" Touchy asked.

Ben said savagely, "I don't know," and flattened his hand to rub his palm on his pants leg.

Marshal Siples had kept walking. Ben heard him step off into and cross the driveway and then the lawman said in a low tone: "Watch it, Ben. They're framing you with that pretty gal."

"They don't have to go to that much trouble to get a fight," Ben said harshly, turning. He sauntered toward the sidewalk, but the marshal wouldn't stop. Instead he increased

his stride, looking straight ahead; and old Tom Chesley turned back from the stable doorway.

Touchy Tolin stayed close to Ben and he propped a shoulder against an awning post as they watched Clint and Stevie, on either side of the girl, bring her down the veranda steps and take her along the sidewalk toward the lower part of town.

"Wonder if she thinks one of them's me," Ben growled.

"Why don't you yell and ask her?"

"I ought to," Ben said.

They watched Clint and Stevie escort the girl into the Blue Front.

"Come on, Touchy. We'd started to go get something to eat; let's go get it."

"I ain't hungry now."

"Well, it's like this, man. You don't have to fish or cut bait, either one, if you don't want to. I told you this was personal."

"I remember. But I have the feeling you ain't got no business messing with them," Touchy said. He spat. "Wish I could see that gal in a red dress that hit her about the knees."

Ben said bitterly, "I'll have her put one on for you."

"You ain't got her yet."

Ben said, "By God, I will get her!" and started across the street.

Touchy overtook him.

"You can see now Ben, why I don't quit and hunt another job. You're such a fool I'd worry myself to death. A woman can cause more damn—"

"Anywhere else," Ben said, "you'd have to work and earn your money."

"If Rupe was with them, I wouldn't mind earning it now. We could settle it then, once and for all."

"Rupe'll get with them if they need him; don't worry about that," Ben said. He stepped upon the restaurant porch, jerked open the screen door, and said, with a hard grin, "Brains before brawn."

"Experience, son."

The S-Bench foreman entered the Blue Front to throw a glance at Clint, Stevie, and the girl, who now occupied a table near the far wall. That side of the room was full of tables and the tables held vinegar cruets, catsup bottles, mustard jars, sugar bowls, and salt and pepper shakers. Only the one table was in use, however, and Pamfillia Trujillo was serving the trio with coffee, all they had ordered.

Touchy Tolin said, "What are we going to eat, Ben?" and turned toward the counter.

Ben didn't reply.

Clint and Stevie had seated the girl so they could look at her and face the street. Now the S-Bench foreman's speaking his boss's name impelled her to look around. She gazed at Ben Sefton steadily until he had seated himself beside his foreman.

Ben hadn't looked at the girl and he hadn't looked at the Greers either. Now he regarded his hands, waiting for Pamfillia to come for their order. Touchy Tolin was perusing the bill of fare, on the wall. Across the room, Clint Greer said loudly, "Jo, would it make any difference if I told you I'm *not* Ben Sefton?"

Before the girl could reply, Ben whirled on the stool, springing erect. He said, "I'm Ben Sefton!"

Touchy Tolin got up and took Ben by the arm and, as Ben jerked loose, slid his fingers under Ben's coat and took his six-shooter. Touchy knew he couldn't stop his young boss, but he

was going to prevent a killing, if possible.

Knowing his foreman wouldn't return the Colt without a struggle, Ben turned away and, doffing his Stetson, approached the table.

The brothers got up and stood beside their chairs, watching Ben, who stopped beside the girl. She had remained seated, an arm resting on the tablecloth and the upper part of her face still veiled.

Stevie said, "Better go back to your guardeen, Ben."

"I've got his gun," Touchy said, "and he don't pack no knife or tubhandles. You Greers take warning."

Ben made a slight gesture with his hand and Clint Greer said, "Don't touch her!"

"I didn't hear her say not to."

"You heard Clint," Stevie said.

"The hell with Clint and you, too," Ben said. "She's mine and I'm taking her." His fingers closed on the girl's gloved wrist.

The girl leaped to her feet, screaming. "Don't! Oh, don't!" She couldn't stop it, either, though, for Clint upended his chair in one move and brought it crashing down upon Ben's head and upflung arm in another.

Ben staggered sideways and then forward until he hit a table and he fell amid the debris, hearing Touchy say, "Shut up, sister, and get out of the way."

The girl promptly raced to Touchy himself for protection, while Juan Trujillo, still wearing his apron, ran out the back door. He wasn't frightened, though, and neither was Pamfillia, who came up behind the counter as Stevie Greer made a short run to kick the fallen man in the ribs.

Ben grunted, hurt just enough to clear his head.

Stevie had got his spur caught in the cloth of the overturned table and Ben, feeling a bottle under his shoulder, gripped it and hurled it upward. Hit under the brow, Stevie went backward, and the tablecloth followed. He tried to stomp free of the thing. Coming off the floor, Ben hit him behind the ear and knocked him sprawling.

Clint Greer still stood with the remains of the chair poised, waiting to see if he were needed. Now he lunged forward, swinging at Ben's head. Ben dropped under the blow and came up with his arms locked around Clint's body. Digging his chin into Clint's shoulder, Ben took him pounding backward.

Clint screamed, went limp, and they both fell, with Clint's skull striking the chunk of quartz that propped open the front door.

Getting erect, Ben saw Stevie coming at him, trying to skewer him with a splintered chair leg.

Ben dodged the thrust; Stevie sought to club him; and Ben grabbed the bludgeon.

Stevie let go and whirled to run toward the rear.

Ben threw down the club and took after him, chasing him through the kitchen and into the alley.

Wild-eyed and disheveled, Stevie stopped and pulled his six-gun, saying, "Stay where you are, Ben, or I'll kill you!"

Ben stopped.

Breathing hard, Stevie started backing away. "I'm goin' to find Rupe, and you'll get yours for what you did to Clint!" Holstering his gun, he trot-

ted up the alley, leaving Ben Sefton with a grave look on his face.

Wondering if he had broken Clint's back made Ben sick to his stomach. He'd had enough of this fight and he was no longer angry, not even about the girl.

Regret and shame filled him, for he knew he had done wrong. After identifying himself, he should have stopped. The girl could have come to him, had she wanted to.

Coming back through the cafe kitchen, Ben heard voices. He saw that Marshal Siples and five of the Antlers townsmen had entered the Blue Front and they had Clint on his feet. Talk ceased. All faced Ben, and the girl, clinging to Touchy Tolin's arm, threw back her veil.

Ben ignored her, though, and walked over to retrieve his hat, which he shaped and donned. The fact that his suit was in tatters escaped him at the moment.

"Ben, the lady here—" Marshal Siples began.

"Come on, Touchy," Ben said. "It's time we got gone."

Clint Greer muttered, "Damned bull-headed—" and then closed his lips on the cigarette one of the merchants had rolled and lit for him.

"Ben—Mr. Sefton," the girl said, "I'm Joyce Jones. An entertainer. D-down at the Palace. They said it was only a joke."

"Nobody's going to harm you, ma'am," Marshal Siples declared. "Long as I'm able-bodied, they ain't!"

Ben had thrown a quick look at the girl, and he saw Juan Trujillo, George Baggott, and Rupe Greer hurrying to the Blue Front, bringing another girl.

This girl was yellow-haired, too, and bareheaded. She carried her chin at a lovely angle and walked with a grace that was a pleasure to behold. She wasn't dressed for the street, though. She wore a blue robe over other and longer garments that were white and lacy, and which she had to lift as rotund George Baggott and Rupe Greer helped her onto the porch.

"How bad was it?" the hotel man gulped, entering first.

Juan Trujillo said to Pamfillia, "She was indeed in bed, fast asleep. Nevertheless, as you can see with your own eyes, I have brought her here, my little fat one."

Marshal Siples said, "Ben, there's your girl," and leveled a fat finger at Josephine Lucas, who threw an indignant look at Clint Greer and, without hesitation, rushed toward Ben Sefton with outstretched hands.

"You've been beaten!"

"It took two of them, though, ma'am."

Rupe Greer said to Clint, "You played the devil, now didn't you? Come on here!"

Clint followed his brother out.

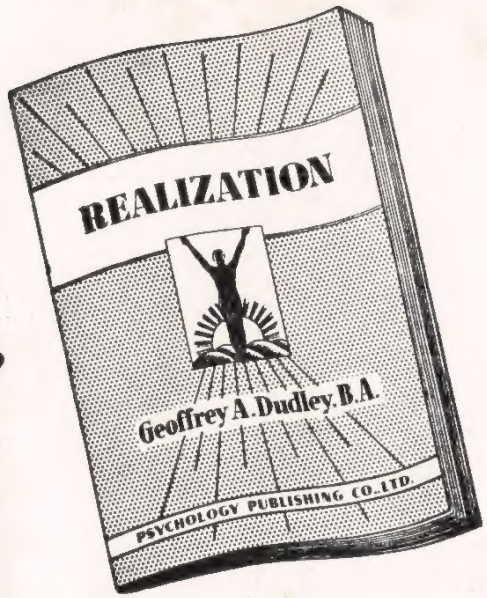
On the porch, Rupe stopped to toss Juan Trujillo a roll of bills, paying for the damage.

"Ben," he said then, letting the screen slam, "I've changed my mind. I'll join the damned Association."

"Join what?" Josephine Lucas asked.

She looked up at Ben, who looked down at her; and Touchy turned to Joyce Jones and winked.

THE END



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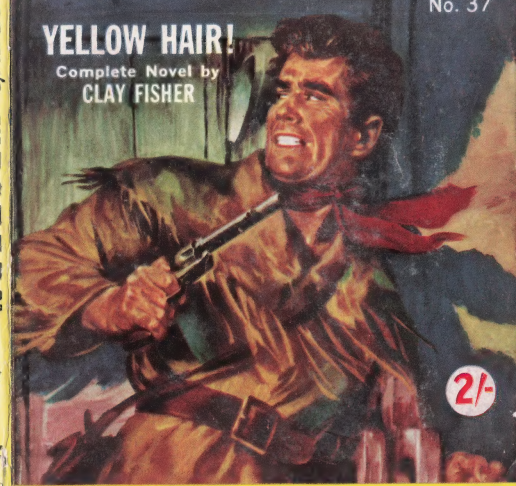

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